

Church: A Place for Inclusion, Justice and Healing
Rally Day ~ Holy Trinity UMC

September 10, 2006 ~ 14th Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Susan Morrison

Proverbs 22: 1-2, 8-9, 22-23

A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold.²The rich and the poor have this in common: God is the maker of them all. ⁸Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity, and the rod of anger will fail.⁹Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor. ²²Do not rob the poor because they are poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate;²³ for God pleads their cause and despoils of life those who despoil them.

Psalm 122

¹I was glad when they said to me, “Let us go to the house of the Lord!” ²Our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem. ³Jerusalem—built as a city that is bound firmly together. ⁴To it the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord, as was decreed for Israel, to give thanks to the name of the Lord. ⁵For there the thrones for judgment were set up, the thrones of the house of David.

⁶Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: “May they prosper who love you. ⁷Peace be within your walls, and security within your towers.” ⁸For the sake of my relatives and friends I will say, “Peace be within you.” ⁹For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your good.

Mark 7:24-37

²⁴From there Jesus set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, ²⁵but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. ²⁶Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷He said to her, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” ²⁸But she answered him, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” ²⁹Then he said to her, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.” ³⁰So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

³¹Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. ³²They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. ³³He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. ³⁴Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” ³⁵And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. ³⁶Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. ³⁷They were astounded beyond measure, saying, “He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.”

Today's gospel lesson is first and foremost a lesson in geography. Understanding where Jesus was and the implications of his context is at the heart of what these two healing stories have to say to us today. So, let's have a geography lesson. And let's use those wonderful new pew bibles to help us find out where today's lesson is located.

At the very back of the bible you will find a map of the *Land of Israel and Palestine in the First Century of the Common Era*. Let's turn to that map and first of all find the Sea of Galilee. That was clearly an area that was home to the Jews. It is in and around this area of Galilee and on down into the yellow area of Samaria and Judea (which includes Bethlehem and Jerusalem) that Jesus engaged in most of his ministry. It would have been unusual for him to leave Jewish territory because there was such tension between the Jews and the Gentiles of his day. However, that's exactly what we find in today's lesson. Jesus travels into enemy territory. Mark reports that he goes first to Tyre (which is on the Mediterranean Sea in the Roman Province of Syria) and then further north to Sidon before finding his way back to the Sea of Galilee and the region of the Decapolis (in orange on the map).

One of the reasons that the Jews and the Gentiles were enemies was because the Jewish farmers from Galilee resented the fact that most of their agricultural produce did not find its way to the tables of Jewish peasants, but rather to the markets of Tyre. Their food ended up on the tables of the wealthy Gentiles. They also worshipped different Gods and there had been long standing hostility between the Greek and the Jewish religions.

What do we know about the location of Tyre and Sidon today? They are in Lebanon and have been the recent target of Israeli bombs in the recent 34 day war between Hezbollah and Israel. Even as international forces arrive to maintain the ceasefire, there is still great tension between citizens of Israel and Lebanon.

So, imagine Jesus being a contemporary Jew from Israel. And in the midst of the current situation he chooses to travel into Lebanon and visit two of their great cities, Tyre and Sidon. And there he has two life changing encounters with those who were his "enemies."

First we find him in Tyre trying to be anonymous and seeking some rest from his demanding schedule. Mark reports that he enters a house and does not want anyone to know he is there. Much to his dismay, an incident erupts. It is actually quite scandalous because it is a Syrophenician woman – one who lives in this Greek region called Phoenicia which is part of the Roman province of Syria – who accosts him. No wonder he is rude to her. Here is a Greek woman who approaches him in the privacy of a residence! She is everything that an enemy could be! a woman, a non practicing Jew and of Greek ethnicity. And she asks Jesus to heal her daughter. Obviously Jesus' reputation has preceded him into this Gentile territory.

Is it any wonder that his first response is one that defends the collective honor of his Jewish ancestry and religious tradition? As harsh as it is, his rebuff is understandable. He basically refers to her and her people as "dogs." It is his people, the Jews, who are God's chosen children and who get to sit at table. Their food should not be taken from them, he says, and thrown to "the dogs." In Jesus' day, dogs were not beloved house pets. They often roamed the streets, scavenging for food and were to be avoided. What an insult it was to the Syrophenician woman to be referred to as "a dog."

But this is an uppity woman! She will not take "no" for an answer. Her retort is that even the dogs, who are under the table, get to eat the crumbs that fall from those who are eating at the table. And in that instant, all of history changes. Jesus rethinks his mission. He accepts this

new revelation and realizes that God intended him to bring salvation not only to his own people, the Jews, but also to the enemy, the Gentiles. **Jesus moves from exclusion to inclusion.** Oh, the woman's daughter is healed. But the *real* miracle is not the healing, but the overcoming of prejudice and barriers of race and gender and ethnicity in this transformative moment.

Oh! if only the whole world could read this story and learn how to live together in peace. Pray for the peace. Pray for the peace. Pray for the peace of Jerusalem, invited this morning's Psalm. Pray for the peace of the Middle East, of Ireland, of Darfur, of any corner of our world that knows war and bloodshed. Pray for peace to replace gangs and racial violence in Lawrence and Boston and other cities in our nation. Pray for the peace in all of our homes and within our own families and neighborhoods.

It would seem that this story could be especially helpful for us as we begin a new church year here at Holy Trinity because it invites us, as Christians, to examine how we treat those who are different than we are, especially people of different race, culture, socio-economic status and sexual orientation. Are there some important things that we can do better so as to welcome ALL people at our table?

Over the summer, the members of the Visioning Task Force had assignments to look into demographics and religious trends of the 21st century. I was quite surprised to discover that in Danvers there is only a 3% non Anglo population. Peabody has 10%; Beverly 7% and 25% of Salem residents are non Anglo. What does that mean for our church as we look to the future? It is clear that our congregation currently reflects the demographics of Danvers and that most likely, major future growth will not be among non white households. What this suggests to me is that we, because we will continue to be a predominantly white congregation, must find ways to understand and combat racism. Watching this fall's Survivor series which will feature four racially exclusive teams – blacks, Asians, Hispanics and whites – who will work to outwit and outlast each other while betraying and lying to each other in the hopes of winning one million dollars is not what I have in mind. No! We must take understanding and combating racism seriously as a church community. I'm talking about learning about and understanding racism so that we can engage in meaningful dialogue about racial issues which will lead to effective action and social change. We must learn how to talk to our children and youth about racial issues. Too often, our white privilege makes us blind and deaf to race-related issues. We live in a world so full of white privilege that we are often unaware of how the system of advantage perpetuates oppression and stereotyping. Like Jesus, we need to listen to those who are different than us and let their experiences, their stories change our lives.

Jesus models for us in this morning's lesson how to move from a position of exclusion to one of inclusion. He also models for us how to lose an argument! Think about it. How often are you willing to say "You're right. I'm wrong." It's much easier to continue to justify your point of view than to "lose" the argument. Jesus acknowledges that he is wrong and grants his enemy her petition. Ah, yes! this lesson needs to be kept handy as we work together on our future vision. There are going to be many points of view! many different interests! But in the end, we will come together and align ourselves around a vision and a strategic plan for the next 4 – 5 years. It means that many will have to lose their arguments in order to win a vision for this body of Christ.

Love is the winner in this lesson. A woman loves her child so much that she is willing to risk everything to have her daughter healed. It must not have been easy for a Gentile woman to approach a Jewish teacher for help. Yet love brought her across boundaries of gender, religion and ethnic origins. And God's love proved to know no boundaries! God's love is an inclusive

one. It is a love that knows no limits. It is no wonder that in the end Jesus taught his followers not only to love their neighbor, but to love their enemy as well.

Now from Tyre, Jesus went on still further into enemy territory and traveled the distance to Sidon. And there he takes a deaf man apart from the crowd, surely not wanting to further risk his reputation in Gentile territory. And he heals this man who was deaf and mute. But notice that in this story, it is not the deaf man who initiates the action. It is the friends of the deaf man, his community, that literally bring the man into Jesus' presence for the healing. They beg Jesus to lay his hand on their friend.

Again, what a great message for the beginning of our church year. God truly depends on us to BRING people to church so that they can meet Jesus. Unless we take action, they simply won't come. People need to be invited to "come and see" Holy Trinity at worship, singing and praying and growing together in our discipleship. And here, through us, others will meet the living Christ.

This healing that takes place in Sidon reiterates the "love your enemy" theme. Once again Jesus encounters someone who would be considered an enemy. People with physical disabilities were ostracized by their family and community. Yet once again Jesus loves his enemy and teaches us by example to do the same.

On this day before the 5th anniversary of 9/11 it is good to be reminded that Jesus expects us, his disciples, to love our enemies.

Throughout August, I shared with you stories from Tilda Norberg's book *Ashes Transformed* in which she writes about stories of how God had been extraordinarily active in the lives of ordinary people during and after the tragedy. These are the stories of people who have been comforted and challenged by God's faithful presence in the midst of their fear and sorrow. One such story is simply titled *Brothers*.

Writes Norberg,

Father Anthony Cowan, a Roman Catholic priest in Manhattan, heard about a remarkable act of love that occurred as panic-stricken people were running down the stairs in one of the World Trade towers. As an Islamic Arab from Palestine was running for his life in the surging crowd, he stumbled and fell. Paralyzed with fear and unable to get up, he was trampled within seconds by hundreds of feet rushing past him.

Then the man felt an arm on his shoulder and a voice speaking to him, "Get up brother! We have to get out of here." Unable to stand because of his injuries, he felt himself being picked up. Again he heard the voice: "Brother, we have to get out of here!"

Half dragged, half carried down many stories, the man finally emerged from the building leaning heavily on his rescuer. As the injured Palestinian turned to thank the person who had carried him to safety, his eyes widened, for the person who had called him "brother," the man who had saved his life, was his supposed enemy, a Hasidic Jew. (p.54)

Let us take the power of God's love and Jesus' acceptance with us as we leave here this day. In the coming week, let us look into the face of each person that we see and say to ourselves "She is my sister. He is my brother..." be it a homeless person, or a surly teenager, or a cantankerous grouch, or an alcoholic who has passed out on the sidewalk, or a driver with a bad case of road rage, or someone from a different race, religion, sexual orientation or ethnic background, or a neighbor or an enemy. Remember this morning's geography lesson and all that it had to teach us. If Jesus could open the ears of a deaf man in Sidon, so, too, he can open our ears to the lesson of acceptance.

Church Council has set *Growth in our discipleship with Jesus Christ* as our goal for this coming year. That includes growth in our spiritual lives; growth in our local and global missions and ministries; and growth in membership and financial giving. I would like to add to this list "growth in our acceptance of each other." In the midst of our rich diversity of ideas and opinions, personalities and ways of doing things, we need to treat one another with acceptance and respect. We need to banish gossip and replace it with constructive and honest conversations with each other; we need to stop murmuring and complaining and turn negativity into positive ways to build up this body of Christ.

The challenge is ours. Jesus is counting on us! Why he came through the door this morning with each one of us and will go back out through the door with each one of us. His spirit is ever present to remind us that as church, we are a place where inclusion and justice and healing takes place through the mighty love of God and grace of Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God. Alleluia! Amen!