

Joshua 24:14-18
Mark 4:24-30
Text: Hosea 14:5a

St. John's Presbyterian Church
Devon, Pennsylvania, 19333
Victor M. Wilson, D.Min., Pastor

Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 10, 2006

GOOD NEWS FOR THE NOT SO DESPERATE

Choose this day whom you will serve, but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord. *Joshua 24:15b*

Mark's story about the Syrophenician woman and Jesus is about two pretty desperate people in that moment. I don't know about you, but as I get a bit older I notice that there are times, especially toward the end of a long day, when I reach a sensory saturation level and I just need to switch off. Sound familiar? Jesus seems to be there. Mark is legendary for his portrayal of Jesus' humanity, especially the sometimes passionate, even incendiary side of his nature, which three later gospels tend to edit out. Jesus gets angry and frustrated with his disciples, who just don't quite get it much of the time (just like us!) He tries to heal a man in the passage following this, but it doesn't work the first time, so he has to try again. He withers a fig tree that looks like it has fruit but on inspection bears none—he happens to be hungry. He has no resurrection appearances because he wants us to decide that issue through personal faith experience. He's gets exhausted, just like us. Mark is just so honest about life. It's my favorite gospel, not because, like Sir Adrian Boult the famous conductor, when ask his favorite opera he replied "'L. Boheme', because its the shortest!", but because it's so dense with insight and so profoundly well crafted.

Jesus is away from Galilee in the coastal gentile territory of Syrophenician, modern day Lebanon. His message has been stumbling on many a deaf ear (read the previous passage). People clamor for what he can do for their ailments in the short term, rather than what they can get from his teachings for the long term. Frankly, he's exhausted. "He entered a house," Mark says "and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice." You know how it is, it's late, your energy tank is running on fumes, and a chatty neighbor calls gushing for ten minutes about four pages of Acme specials.

A gentile mother with a sick daughter (perhaps with seizures) finds where he's staying and comes into the house, bowing at Jesus' feet, a sign both of her reverence for him and her desperation. She pleads with Jesus to heal her daughter. Jesus responds with one of the most unsettling responses in all the Bible. He says to her that the "children" of Israel are to be fed first (implying that the people of Israel are his first priority), not gentile "dogs." It raises all sorts of questions. What then was he doing in gentile territory in the first place? Was he just trying to get away from Israel for a break, because he was becoming so well known? Was he being racist? It can sound that way. Calling someone a dog with this particular word was a sneering epithet often used toward Gentiles. And it

didn't refer to a domesticated lapdog that begs primly for treats by the kitchen table. It was the word for roaming, disgusting scavengers that ran in wild packs living off garbage. Her response takes his breath away. "But sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Jesus is so shaken by her faith, her compassion for her daughter, and her wisdom, that he heals the daughter from a distance, and sends the woman home.

When I read this lectionary passage this past week, the woman's desperate pleading and faith in this stranger rabbi struck me not by its similarity to our experience but in contrast to much of it. It acts like a dramatic foil. Where the woman went to Jesus as the only viable source for her daughter's healing, we have hundreds of skilled professional alternatives. Where Jesus was her security, the focus of all her desperation and hope, we have a range of options to shore up our security—mutual funds, insurance options, capital assets and material comforts that make Jesus a less than desperate alternative. Her sort of desperation is not common to our experience, except when things get personally very precarious, and Jesus becomes a last resort. Martin Copenhaver understands much of the dilemma of moderate faith among we mainstreamers. He's a pastor, and in *Living Faith While Holding Doubts*, he writes very pointedly about what I would call the "not so desperate."

We may reach the point where we are willing to give the Christian faith a bit of a try, attend a few worship services, read a book or two, try our folded hands at prayer. That is, we may be willing to try the Christian faith much as we are willing to try out fishing or oil painting for a few weekends to see if it appeals to us. We want to taste it before we want to make a full meal of it. We want our toe to tell us that the water is fine before we plunge in head first. It is not difficult to understand or appreciate why we prefer caution to headlong commitment. But if we let ourselves become satisfied with only such small and tentative steps, the larger satisfactions of the Christian faith may continue to escape us. The attractiveness of Christianity is seldom revealed in a small sample. Those who hold back from more complete involvement and fuller commitment likely will remain primarily observers and will experience the observer's difficulty in understanding and appreciating the Christian faith.

What also sets us up as less than desperate, I suspect, is that our churches have become less places we go to prepare for action—the gentile mother in the story, I suspect would have done anything Jesus might have asked of her, for the sake of her daughter. We come to church often to soothe the harried soul, or perhaps to take away some pragmatic pill that we can apply to the week ahead. That's not a bad thing, it just becomes thin after a while.

Howard Friend and I had a wonderful conversation late one evening in which he helped me to see how much of Jesus' teaching came out of the ordinary stuff of life, the practical weave of the everyday. And as I reflected on that I realized how much of Jesus' teaching and modeling of life was embedded not in what he does for me—which is a very limited application, but in what his influence potentially can do for others through me. If our motivation for coming to worship, for instance, stops at the personal, at simply soothing one's soul, it's like a cut flower, as Elton Trueblood once wrote, which looks lovely for a day or so, but then fades to nothing because it's cut off from its roots.

If we are to move from the pedestrian faith of the "not so desperate" to something rooted in the long haul, something hungering and thirsting for God, we have to be able to put down roots in God so good fruit can grow and others be nourished. Fruit does not grow from dead

flowers, but from living ones. The goal is relational, to get closer to God, to others, and to our best self.

Back to the text. Wouldn't it have been best if the Syrophenician woman hadn't had to wait until she was desperate before she connected with Jesus. It may not have made for such a compelling story, but her life would have been richer in the interim.

Some time ago I had a conversation with one of our good members that's had a profound effect on me of late, not just at St. John's but to some other commitments I have. This person had done a splendid job building up his own business with a partner. Business was good, and he spent a lot of time finding and cultivating new business. Then, as tends to happen everywhere when things expand, less time seemed available to devote to current accounts, and a few of his clients started to get restless for attention. After a few testy phone calls unnerved him, he had an epiphany. He would commit himself to raising no new business for the year ahead, but instead concentrate fully for the year ahead on reconnecting with his existing clients. It was, he said, the best thing he ever did, for them and for him. Perhaps that's why Jesus kept his inner circle to twelve--so he could connect with them.

St John's has gone through something of the same evolution over the years. We have about 450 active adult members and 200 or so children. Those who study congregations say that it's virtually impossible for a solo pastor to really know, connect with, and care for more than 150 people. I suspect that's true. The times when I do seem to connect most intimately with you tend to cluster around times of illness, bereavement, and weddings. But even these are such finely focused needs that I can only slightly discover what your day to day needs and passions, talents, and hopes and dreams are. It's precisely in so "not so desperate times," when life isn't distracted by big events, that I want to reconnect with you.

So, I have a proposal. Over the last few years we've tended to have quite long series of Bible and book studies on Thursday evenings. This year I plan to change that to 4-5 week studies. Then, for the next few weeks I'd like to spend an hour on Thursday nights with you, perhaps with my feet under your coffee table, or at the church, or in my new cozy study at home (now that Katherine is in Seattle for the year I've commandeered her large garret room), or on our back porch under the trees. Or perhaps we could meet over breakfast or lunch in a restaurant. I'd love to discover who you are, what your interests and challenges are, what the soaring high points have been in your life, and the low points. Perhaps you'll discover more of me. I'd love to hear about your faith journey, your certainties and doubts. I hope you'll discover more about St. John's that you haven't experienced yet. I want to connect better with you, and particularly I want to help you connect with others in the church who share your interests and passions, whatever you seek in life.

Let me know if that interests you. Find some moment to connect with me and let me know. And—try not to wait until you're desperate.

Amen.