

Be a Blessing, Whatever it Takes

[Mark 7:24-30](#)

Rev. Douglas A. Learned
Sunday, August 27, 2006
Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

When I listen to our choir sing, my first response is not to get up and talk but to sit down and listen a little more. What a beautiful music, we are blessed. We are blessed.

Good morning. If you have been out of town during these summer months or away on vacation and you are back at church for the first time in awhile, you maybe wondering who I am! And I should explain, right off the bat, that I am not a guest preacher! I am Doug Learned, one of the new pastors—one of the new staff members—that Gareth was talking about this morning during the announcements. I have even been given an amazing title (Washington is a town of titles, isn't it?): "Executive Pastor!" I have to tell you, there have been a number of occasions over these first few weeks of me being on the job here at National where I've had people come to my office, and we will talk about some matter of business related to life and ministry to the church. And on more than one occasion, I've had people, as they go to the door, turn around and look at me with sincerity on their face and say, "Doug, I know what a pastor is, but what's an Executive Pastor?" And the good news is that you and I have at least one more week to figure that out! This afternoon I'm heading to National airport to fly back to Chicago where my family still is, and we are going to pack up all of the Learned family possessions and move to Washington, DC. In the interest of fair disclosure I need to inform you that I only purchased a one-way ticket! But the Learned family has a minivan and, God willing, he will point that minivan in this direction, and we'll be back in DC in time for the All-Church Picnic next Sunday.

Before we pray, I want to offer a special thanks to all of you for the wonderful ways that you have expressed your condolences and your sympathy at the loss of my father a week and a half ago. Thank you for your prayers. They have meant everything to me and I will carry them back to my family.

Shall we pray?

Lord, I thank you for calling me to serve in this place with such a faithful congregation of Jesus' disciples. And for all the ways this congregation has welcomed me with open arms, thank you for these blessings. I ask that, as we meditate on this word of yours from the gospel of Mark this morning, that we may be nourished by it, and strengthened spiritually to serve you in new, amazing, and surprising ways...according to your perfect plan. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

"From there [Jesus] set out and went away to the region of Tyre."

If you've been watching and reading the news over these past few weeks and months, that first sentence of our passage from Mark is going to get your attention; it should have ring of familiarity to you. This is the region of Tyre, where this verbal exchange takes place between the Syro-Phoenician woman and Jesus. And it is this region where so many of the conflicts of the past month between Hezbollah and Israel have been taking place. Many of the news accounts that you've seen on television have been aired from Tyre. It's a reminder that the places we read about in Scripture are real locations, and not merely lore; they are true locations on this globe of ours.

In the passage from this morning Jesus goes north, out of Galilee, where his ministry is based...to Tyre, to take a break from the crowds and his ministry. The passage says, in verse 24,

"He entered a house, but he did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice..."

It's worth noting that Jesus is stepping out-of-bounds here—both geographically and theologically—out from where a rabbi of the time might normally go.

As a newcomer to Washington, I'm in touch with this feeling of being out-of-bounds. When I first came to Washington months ago, to interview for this position, I wondered what role politics play in the church. It's an obvious question, right? Is this church divided along party lines?

But what I've learned, especially in the past few weeks, as I've solicited advice from all of you in my search for a new house...is that this is indeed a divided church. And the church is divided not only in two; but into three. Three distinct parties: the Virginians, Marylanders and the People of the District! And each of you knows where any self-respecting pastor should live!

I tell you, this presents a unique challenge for those of us on the pastoral staff into fulfilling our ordination vow to 'further the peace and unity of the church!' But I might as well bite the bullet and make it public that the Marylanders have won this time. Ah...Maryland... I looked on the web sight for Maryland and read it's state motto: Maryland is where there are there "manly deeds, and womanly words." I have absolutely no idea what it means; but maybe after a few years here I'll find out.

I make light of boundary divisions, but this is a real issue in Jesus' ministry. And people do not take lightly to the idea of Jesus entering into the homes of Gentiles, eating from their tables, and even getting into theological debates with women, let alone Gentile women! It just isn't done.

But of course Jesus is always crossing bridges that the crowds... and sometimes his disciples... aren't ready to cross. And so, in this

instance, he lets the scenario unfold, trusting that every circumstance in life, no matter how challenging, can be a teachable moment, if we allow God's Spirit to teach us.

And that's what happens in this exchange with the Gentile woman: Jesus lets God's revelation unfold, allowing this Gentile to turn the language of prejudice on its head.

So this woman approaches Jesus, desperate because her daughter's afflicted by a demon. Will he cast this demon out? Now, I've never had a child afflicted by a demon. There were some moments when our children were in their two and three's when we wondered. But we have had a child sick in the hospital, knowing full well that if they didn't get proper treatment, they could get worse and even die. And I know there are children, who don't get well even with all of the medical care in the world. I know that feeling of helplessness, when it comes to your child in trouble; and no matter how hard you try, you can't solve the problem by your own wits or power. That's where this Gentile woman is...desperate for help. And so she's on her knees begging for Jesus to help.

And what does, sweet Jesus say in response? Friends if it were not printed in the Bible, you wouldn't believe it:

"Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

Is that the Jesus we know? The one who loves all of God's children? Calling this woman and her daughter a "dog," unworthy of his first care? It's definitely not the meek and mild Jesus we learned of in the early days of Sunday school. But it is the Jesus who trusts in his Father's power to draw people from all walks of life into his kingdom.

You see...I believe Jesus has this powerful sense for when the Spirit is at work. And before this woman even comes on the scene, he feels it in his bones...like the barometric pressure before a storm...that his Father in Heaven is up to something good.

Do you ever get that feeling? That God is up to something good? It comes with a life of prayer. "The wind blows where it will. Where it comes from and where it's going no one knows," says Jesus in the gospel of John.

But first, the verbal exchange: my ministry is among the children of Israel, says Jesus. Why should I give to you the blessing that belongs to them? Why give good food from the table and feed it to the dogs?

And I believe Jesus senses in his heart how she will respond before the words reach her lips. He senses the Spirit welling up within her...

"Sir, even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the Master's table."

My...what a delight to be there in that moment: I would give anything to have seen the look of anticipation on Jesus' face when she is formulating that response in her mind.

What do the Proverbs say? "Iron sharpens iron..." (Proverbs 27:17). Well this is such a moment. And we might think it cruel, if we do not realize how the Spirit is at work in this moment, talking back to Jesus, through the words of this Gentile.

That's the best kind of moment in our ministries as Jesus' followers: when we have the sense that the Spirit precedes us in a situation, and is already at work before we come on to the scene. Our calling in such moments is to walk through the paces, and say what God would have us say...and trust that God will accomplish what God has set out to do.

One of my favorite actors, Anthony Hopkins, has the habit of memorizing all of the lines of every character in a movie script that he is going to take part in—his own lines, and those of the other actors—so he can feel the motivations of all of the players with which he acts. He says that this exercise...this discipline... gives him a certain freedom in his art.

He said in an interview once, that he sometimes has the feeling that the work of a good actor is to 'not get in the way of the lines, the pacing of the script.' "When the writing is good," he said, "you need only show up on the day of the performance, stand on your mark, and say the words as they've been written". Such thoughts comes from the mind of a master, who makes simple what the rest of us find complex, challenging. What the rest of us struggle to mimic, the master makes natural.

And when a master makes such a statement, what do we say? "Of course, it was always there...we just didn't see it."

"Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

"Of course they do," says Jesus; of course they do. "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter."

If I were paraphrasing that verse, I would have Jesus say, "the demon has already left your daughter..." Because Jesus knows it before she enters the room. He could feel it in the air: 'You had me at hello.'

When Jesus encounters the stirring of faith with a new believer, he declares what the Spirit is already accomplishing, "Go, get up, you faith has made you well." God has ordained it.

Even the dogs...

A couple weeks ago I heard a funny story on the news from Italy about a man who sued his neighbor who had two large dogs that barked incessantly. You might expect that the man with the dogs would have to pay damages to the neighbor who suffered from all of that noise. But not in this particular court room. No, this particular judge ruled in favor of the man with the dogs; and in his ruling

insisted, "Dogs have an existential right to bark."

Even the dogs under the table eat the childrens' crumbs. What an amazing, Spirit-given response. And given that so many Christians today are Gentiles, how fortunate for us...it's true. We've been engrafted onto that vine of the covenant of God, through Jesus Christ.

In truth, all of us stand in need of the saving freedom that comes through Jesus Christ. All of us confess our sins before God, trusting in his mercy...that even the dogs like you and me, can be freed... can be freed from a past that we cannot change, and commissioned to a life worthy of a title...a title that we could not possibly earn...but has been purchased for us by the body and blood of Christ. The title of "disciple"—Jesus- follower.

One aspect of Christian discipleship and leadership in which all of us are always growing, is the realization that God's Spirit precedes us into every room... every conversation... every relationship. To live as if that were true means returning to God the control and direction for our lives that belongs to God. Because Father, Son, and Holy Spirit precede me, I know my place, I know my role...whatever my title or position might be. It's for me to stand on my mark—the mark of a disciple—and be a blessing; be a blessing wherever God would have me be, and by whatever means God would put at my disposal.

In Christ there is no east or west; no north or south; no Executive, Senior or Associate pastors; no presidents or secretaries; no Jews nor Gentiles...but all of us in need of a Savior. When I know this... I know my mark. And I'll stand on that mark and be a blessing, whatever it takes.

Let us pray: Lord you call us to all kinds of circumstances—joyful and troubling. Whenever you call, and wherever you call us, make us a blessing to those around us: ready to speak your words of peace, forgiveness and reconciliation. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.