

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“Desperate Ones”

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Mark 7:24-37

24 From there he 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,²⁵ but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet.²⁶ Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.²⁷ He 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.’²⁸ But she answered him, ‘Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.’²⁹ Then he said to her, ‘For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.’³⁰ So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

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

A couple of months ago we visited Maren who was working at Kings’ Island amusement park near Cincinnati, OH. Between shows Amelia and I were wandering the park and we noticed that there was commotion in the crowd ahead of us. It seems that the children’s television star “Dora the Explorer” was posing for pictures and everyone was lining up for their own shot with the celebrity. Of course, Amelia and I had to join the line and I have the pictures on my Facebook to prove it! Me and Dora!

I remember a moment many years ago at Walt Disney World. Maren and I were standing in the middle of a long line to get the autograph of Baloo, the lovable bear from Disney’s *The Jungle Book*. Maren was probably four years old at the time. It wasn’t that I was a big fan of Baloo. But it seemed to be important to Maren to get his autograph so suddenly it became very important to me. As we stood in line, some other parents managed to cut in front of us, perhaps unaware that the back of the line was behind me. Baloo and his handlers did nothing to stop this influx of line-cutters. I was getting really upset, but being the calm and rational parent that I was and am, I said nothing. Moments later however, Baloo’s handler announced to the crowd that Baloo had to leave to prepare for a show. There would be no more autographs. Maren was obviously disappointed. I on the other hand, was angry. I became a desperate parent. I chased the handler through the crowd and confronted her. I told her how long we had stood in the line in the heat and humidity. I told her about the people cutting in line in front of us. I told her how my daughter was a big fan of *The Jungle Book*. I told her I

expected some kind of consideration. But the handler merely offered me a polite apology and told me that there was really no official line for Baloo's autograph. I was wrong to assume that there was any kind of order to the system. She was sorry that I had waited so long but now Baloo had to move on to his next stop. She turned and left me with a pleasant Disney smile. I was outraged! We visited Disney World two years later. At that time there were well organized and supervised lines for character autographs. I'd like to think that my actions caused some theme park reform!

Desperation changes a lot of things. I saw a recent special observing the anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. The film clips showed the looting and stealing that occurred. While everyone was horrified by those pilfering television sets and computers, many were simply helping themselves to clean water, bread, and cereal-just to stay alive. I read about it recently in the tales of people packed in the back of sweltering trucks and young mothers tying themselves to the top of buses, each taking a chance on crossing the border in search of work and money and a better life. I heard it in the voice of a relative in my hometown, where the nearby factories are closed and the unemployment rate is 20%. He wonders what he will do and where he will have to go to find work. That anxiousness bordering on desperation is all too apparent these days.

In today's Scripture lesson, Jesus has just left Galilee and has entered the region of Tyre. Mark makes mention of this probably because it is one of the few times that Jesus journeys outside the limits of Judea. As he enters a house in Tyre, in the heart of paganland, he seems to be seeking some time alone. Mark says, "He did not want anyone to know he was there." But like any celebrity, Jesus couldn't hide. Fans. Groupies. Paparazzi. People found out where he was and they showed up at the house, each with their own special and important need they hoped Jesus might fulfill.

It is the beginning of this story that I find most interesting. A Gentile woman, a Greek from Syria, comes to Jesus and begs him to cast out a demon from her daughter. And she is desperate! Heidi Husted writes that this is a woman with chutzpah and compares her to an illegal alien marching into the Oval Office to see the President, or a bag lady trying to make an appointment with Bill Gates.

While her request doesn't seem too strange based on the fact that Jesus had already cast out many other demons, Jesus reaction is cold and cruel-even downright insulting. He calls her "a dog." He says, "it isn't right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs." Take note here- Jesus wasn't calling her a cute and cuddly little puppy. Dogs were creatures found on the street scavenging for food. Jesus said it wasn't right to him to take what was intended for others and give it outsiders. He apparently did not want to dilute his mission. His words were almost a crass way of saying, "charity begins at home."

We might want to find some excuse for Jesus. Maybe he was having a bad and stressful day; he was after all looking for a retreat. But Mark doesn't offer any apology. Jesus' mission was to serve the lost sheep of Israel. He was not obligated to answer the desperate plea of a desperate woman outside the faith.

But this woman does not back down. She keeps nipping at Jesus' feet, faithful in her debate and in her expressing her need. She turns the metaphor around on Jesus, "even the dogs that hang around under the table get to eat the crumbs that fall to the floor." She is arguing for some scrap of grace, promoting not her right to his healing but her faith in seeking his healing.

I am reminded of the premise of the 2002 motion picture *John Q* starring Denzell Washington. Washington's character was John Quincy Archibald, a man whose son collapsed from heart failure in the midst of a basketball game. He rushed the boy to a hospital emergency room and is told that the son's only hope is a heart transplant. Unfortunately, Archibald's insurance will not cover the procedure. It appears that there

is no chance to his son to survive. Out of other options, Archibald is moved to action. He was desperate. He takes the emergency room staff and patients hostage until the doctors agree to do the transplant. The movie was advertised with this line, "Give a father no options and you leave him no choice."

At this point in the Biblical story, Jesus notices the faith of the woman. Jesus tells the woman to return home where she will find that her daughter has already been healed. The gospel and the power of God's healing goes to the dogs. This woman, outside the establishment, knowing nothing of the beliefs and traditions of the religion, is lifted up as a paragon of faith. She hasn't taken any Bible studies. She didn't go through confirmation class. She didn't have a regular pew at the temple. She probably wasn't worried about living her life according to the commands of God. She was simply a desperate woman, a woman who was at the end of her rope, a woman who was at a point where she had to reach out for help. And she had faith enough to understand that reaching out to Jesus was the thing to do. In his response Jesus seems to understand that true faith wasn't based on knowing something or belonging or following rules. Faith was a matter of being vulnerable and desperate enough to reach out and to fall into the hope that is the love of God.

Too often we tend to view faith as a noun, something we possess or need to possess. In order to have faith you must believe this and that and this. There are all sorts of requirements one must satisfy before those who guard the faith will certify your success. The woman in this story of Scripture had done none of that. Yet twentieth century theologian Paul Tillich described faith as a "reaching out" or "grasping" for the presence of God. Faith comes at those moments in life when we are suddenly vulnerable enough to recognize our need and when we are finally made humble enough to understand that it is only through a power greater than ourselves that this need can be addressed. William Willimon writes, "When human need and divine compassion meet, this is faith.... Faith is a matter of somebody being desperate enough to reach out, and perceptive enough to reach toward Jesus."

There is a Hebrew tale of two rabbis. One of the rabbis went to study the Torah with the second. The second rabbi's son fell sick and the first rabbi was asked to pray for his recovery. The rabbi put his head between his knees, the position of earnest prayer, and prayed for mercy upon the boy. The boy lived. The second rabbi was impressed. He said to his wife, "If I had prayed like that, nothing would have happened." She asked, "Is the first rabbi greater than you?" "No," he replied, "but he prays like a servant before the king while I pray like a prince before the king."

As we seek the Kingdom of God in our lives and our world, we must approach God not from our own strength or entitlement, but from vulnerability and desire to seek God's strength. Instead of concerning ourselves with position and status, we are to humbly embrace God's intention. There will come a time when we need a miracle in the worst of ways. And the gospel tells us that that God we worship is never very far away. We can make that leap of faith, out of desperation, like a servant, into the arms of God. If we are humble enough to trust and approach a God who can change things for the better, our faith will find a hopeful, healing companion.