

Sermon for September 23, 2018 – “Imagining Jesus”

Text(s): Mark 7:24-37

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A Sunday school teacher was observing her classroom of children while they drew. She would occasionally walk around to see each child’s artwork. As she got to one child who was working diligently, she asked the little girl what she was drawing. The girl replied, “I’m drawing God.” The teacher paused and said, “But no one knows what God looks like.” Without missing a beat – or looking up from her drawing – the little girl replied, “They will in a minute.”

So, what does God look like? When you think about God what picture or image comes to mind? How many picture an older, elderly gentleman with long-ish white hair and a beard? What about Jesus? When you think about Jesus what image or picture comes to mind? Let’s try something. I want you to just close your eyes, take a deep breath, clear your mind, and picture Jesus. Okay, do you have an image in your head? Great. Now, I just have a few questions for you. In your imagined picture of Jesus does He have long hair and a full beard? Is He wearing a long robe and sandals? Does He have a calm, serene look on His face? Is He handsome? Is He Caucasian? Is He surrounded by children? Is He surrounded by sheep, holding a shepherd’s staff? Is He holding one of the sheep? Are His arms outstretched or in some type of a welcoming posture? Is He performing a miracle? Is He healing someone? Or sitting patiently teaching them? My guess is that you said yes to at least 2-3 of those things. What I find so interesting is that even though we all have unique beliefs about and understandings of Jesus, our image of Him is often quite similar. And it doesn’t matter how many artists or film-makers have reimagined and reinterpreted our Savior because our Jesus usually looks calm, happy, and welcoming. Yet, Scripture paints a different picture. In fact, the Gospels are full of stories where Jesus is sarcastic, reclusive, and even grumpy. Today’s reading is a perfect example. In the preceding chapters Jesus had already performed a number of miracles including healing the sick and demon-possessed, walking on water, and feeding the 5,000. So, by the time we encounter Him in the Gentile region of Tyre there’s no doubt that Jesus was exhausted and in need of some down time. And yet, He could not escape being noticed because a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit somehow finds out that He’s in town, seeks Jesus out, bows down at His feet and begs Him to cast the demon out of her daughter. To which Jesus responds by saying **“Let the children be fed first for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”** Now, much has been written about this particular text. I’ve preached on it a number of times myself. Make no mistake, there’s been plenty of conjecture about what Jesus is saying here, but the truth is we really don’t know for sure! It would seem as if He’s calling the woman a dog but that doesn’t really fit our image of Jesus does it? We can only speculate about why Jesus was so dismissive, however, consistent with His intended mission Jesus was here. After all, the Gospels, especially Matthew, Mark and Luke, are clear that His ministry was to the Jews and, as the text so plainly points out, the woman is a Gentile of Syro-Phoenecian origin. But instead of being offended or even discouraged by Jesus’ harsh reaction the woman presses on. She accepts His disparaging characterization, that of a dog, and even uses Jesus’ own words against Him by saying, “Fine, You can call me a dog but even dogs get the crumbs that fall from the table.”

With that Jesus relents and frees the woman’s child from the demon possessing her. And the sun shone above them as they skipped off into the sunset and lived happily ever after. The End.

If only it were that simple. I gotta be honest, I always struggle with this passage. It made me realize how attached I am to my domesticated, loving version of Jesus; the Jesus that bids everyone to come to Him no matter the time or the place. The Jesus that never tires or pulls away. The Jesus that has no tricks up His sleeve because what you see is what you get. And what you get are usually rainbows and sunshine. Yet, as I said earlier, scripture paints a different picture of Jesus, one where He's indeed divine yet also VERY human. This more realistic version of Jesus experiences the wide range of needs and emotions common to humankind. He gets annoyed with the disciples' stupidity. He gets overwhelmed by the burden He's called to bear. He gets tired of having to be "on" all the time. So, throughout the Gospels we read how Jesus goes off by Himself to pray, to recharge, to be alone with His Father. Except this time – He's unsuccessful. He gets cornered by a woman in need of help. So, instead of encountering the "come-to-me-all-you-who-are-weary" Jesus, the Syrophenician woman gets the "go-away-all-of-you-because-I'm-weary" Jesus. And since we're polite, well-mannered, 21st-century Christians, well, we don't really like this Jesus. We certainly don't "get" this Jesus. We don't get that He doesn't just heal the woman's daughter when she asks Him. And we don't get that He doesn't live up to our expectations of who we think Jesus should be. But, if we're able to step back from our expectations and our own ideas and images of Jesus we might be able to see what this passage might be about. That it isn't about Him **rejecting** the woman's desperate request but rather, **recognizing** her desperate belief.

Let's start with the desperate part. No doubt the woman is at the end of her rope. Her daughter has something no doctor can fix. She doesn't just have a fever. She's not suffering from some disease. An unclean spirit, a demon, has possessed her. That mom is desperate is probably an understatement. Yet, in the depths of her helplessness, this woman, this mother, hears a story about a man from Galilee who not only makes the lame to walk and the blind to see but casts demons out into the darkness where they belong. Normally she'd chalk such tales up to idle chatter of country folk, but these accounts were different. This Jesus was different. His power was evident. His message was clear. His compassion was overwhelming. Many were saying it was too good to be true, but she couldn't shake the feeling that maybe it was so good that it had to be true. This is where the whole "belief" part comes in. You see, it didn't take long for the stories to stop being just stories as more and more witnesses came forward, those who had seen this Jesus of Nazareth at work firsthand. And it didn't take long for the woman's curiosity to turn into hope and her hope to turn into expectation and her expectation to turn into belief. She began to believe that the stories about Jesus were true. She began to believe that Jesus was more than just an ordinary man. She began to believe in Jesus.

Now, some may dismiss this belief born of desperation, much as we might dismiss prison conversions, especially those for prisoners on death row. We might, if we use the Oxford Dictionary definition of desperate as the "feeling or showing a hopeless sense that a situation is so bad as to be impossible to deal with." But that same dictionary also has a **predicative** definition...one that reads "(of someone) having a great need or desire for something." Like a glass of water or relationship with people.

This is the desperation that we should have for God, a great need or desire for God. And it was this desperate belief that drove the woman to try to find out where Jesus would be. It was this desperate belief that led her to fall at His feet and beg Him for a miracle. It was this desperate belief that fueled her fight for a crumb when she was denied bread. It's this desperate belief that we Christians call **faith**. And despite any issues we may have with Jesus' response here I hope we've come to really appreciate what He's doing here.

Because if Jesus had reacted the way we'd have expected Him to, if Jesus had just healed the woman's daughter outright like He did every other time in Mark, then not only would we still have this unrealistic perception of who Jesus is, but we'd also have an unrealistic perception of who we are as people of faith. You see, by domesticating Jesus we've also domesticated the life of faith. Somewhere along the line we were told that our faith is grounded in Jesus' response to our incessant requests. If God gives us whatever we want when we want it, how we want it, then God must be real. Our faith must be real.

We love the Jesus we find elsewhere in the gospels, even the angry Jesus chasing the money-changers out of the temple because, let's face it, they deserved it. We love the Jesus who refers to Himself as the good shepherd, the one we found on the cover of our children's Bibles because, well, this Jesus gives people what they want. But, the problem with that whether we're aware of it or not, is that we can all too easily start putting our faith in a divine Santa Claus rather than a merciful Savior. And this is a problem because any version of Jesus that we create for ourselves is likely to be incomplete and will ultimately let us down. Let me say that again...Any version of Jesus that we create for ourselves is likely to be incomplete and will ultimately let us down. That's the problem when we attempt to make God in **our** image. And here, brothers and sisters, is the thing; actually, the first of two things. If the Syrophenician woman teaches us anything, if **Jesus** teaches us anything in this passage, it's that faith isn't about what Jesus **does** but about who Jesus **IS!** Faith is not about getting that for which we ask but getting the One for whom we're asking. Faith is not about **our** needs, **our** wants, and **our** plan. Matter of fact, you want to hear God laugh tell Him your plan. So, no, this isn't about us at all. This is about God. God's will. God's plan.

When it comes down to it, our faith is not about us at all. Our faith is about Him, our Savior, our Messiah, our Lord, Jesus Christ. But the best part is this, and here's the other thing, while we don't know the **where**, the **when** or the **how**, we believe the **who**, the **what** and the **why**. Because, as Christians we know and believe that the **who** is Jesus Christ, that the **what** is a life marked by forgiveness, redemption, healing, and grace, that the **why** is that God loves us more than we could ever hope for or imagine. So, while the life of faith doesn't always happen in the way we would expect, we, as Christians, continue to desperately believe. Not necessarily because we want to, but because we have to. After all, who can we truly rely on in the depths of our deepest sadness, grief or pain? Who can we hope in when it seems all hope is lost? Jesus. Why? Because Jesus is the only one who can take our desperate belief and call it faith.

I don't know about you but when I close my eyes I don't want to see somebody else's version of Jesus. When I close my eyes, I want to be blown away by the Jesus I see. Because as it turns out this is the Jesus who bids the little ones to come to Him **and** who casts out demons. This is the Jesus who preaches to the masses **and** who goes to the mountains to pray. This is the Jesus who died on a cross **and** who was raised three days later. And this is the Jesus who carries my faith, your faith, **ALL** our faith.

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.