HUH?
Scripture: Mark 7:24-37

FOCUS: In this rather odd scripture we find deep truths of God in the most unlikely of places.

Wow, where to begin with this passage of scripture! There is a lot here that at first blush seems a little bit squirrely. Actually, there is stuff here that looks squirrely after a significant amount of pondering over the years. But that doesn’t mean we should avoid it. In fact it ought to lead us to dig a bit deeper into the stories. We need some background and we need to consider context.

We begin by being told that Jesus had set out for the region of Tyre. We know from the scripture we read last week that he was traveling from Gennesaret at the northern end of the Sea of Galilee. It had been a stressful and combative time there. Jesus had ministered to scores of folks healing, encouraging, offering hope. Then those pesky troublemakers, scribes and Pharisees, had made the ninety mile journey from Jerusalem for the sole purpose of harassing Jesus and his disciples. They were bound together by legalism and power and intended to use their combined strength and passion to defame and challenge a group of 13 they considered to be from another tribe. More about that tribal thing later.

You remember the scribes and Pharisees were uptight because the disciples had eaten without washing their hands. The concern was not hygiene, rather it was a matter of tradition. It was about ritual washing. Now there is nothing wrong with rituals and traditions. We have plenty of them both in our denomination and here in our congregation. Our services of worship are similar in structure each week, we often repeat the Apostle’s creed. We generally have communion each first Sunday, we honor Advent and Lent. And all those things are good, if they are properly honored as tools to point us to God and to connect us with God’s Spirit.

But for these guys they had taken on a life of their own. No longer were the traditions means to connect, they had become ends to be honored by mindless obedience. I pray that none of our traditions have fallen into that trap, that we remember the meaning behind what we do so that by our observances we are challenged to be faithful in service and discipleship. And above all it is my prayer that we never come to use our traditions as tools with which to attack those whose traditions are not ours.

Have you noticed that we human beings have this strong tendency toward tribal behaviour? We identify with blood-related family groups and with a variety of other groups with which we have something in common. Nations, political parties, civic clubs, churches, hobby interest groups. Speaking of tribes, many of us donned our ceremonial gear yesterday as we ushered in that most tribal of all times of year, football season! We as a species seem to be obsessed with huddling up with folks like us and planning strategy to defeat or at least to finish ahead of those other tribes.

Tribal behaviour was, if anything, more prevalent in biblical times than it is in America today. Unfortunately in the part of the world in which Jesus lived and ministered tribalism is clearly as strong as ever. Just look at Israel and the Palestinians, consider Sunni and Shiite factions. Watch in horror as European communities seek to both deal with the problem of refugees and maintain their national purity. As we seek to understand the unsettling encounter between Jesus and the Syrophoenician woman we be aware of the strong tribal attitudes of the day.

We are not given much information about Jesus’ travels leading up to the events of which we have read this morning. We are simply told that he went away to the region of Tyre, entered a house, presumably it was the home of an early follower, and didn’t want anyone to know he was there. Haven’t we all been there? For all of us there come those times when we just want to escape all the activity, all the pressure, all the responsibility of our many commitments. In this passage Jesus is very human, fully human. He is a bit overwhelmed by all the attention. He must be exhausted. He desperately wants to simply be left alone. It was not to be. Mark writes simply, ***“But he could not escape notice.”***

That is what happens when someone offers to a hurting world the healing and wholeness it is so desperately searching for. The word gets around and there is nowhere to go to recharge. No sooner had Jesus settled down, hoping for a peaceful respite from all the activity, than this woman arrived at the door. She was humble, bowed at his feet, then told her story. She was bold but must have surely been more that a bit anxious. Women just didn’t approach men who were not their husbands, in fact they didn’t even approach their husbands in public. And she wasn’t just a woman, she was a gentile. Any good Jew would know that she was definitely of the wrong tribe and in the minds of her fellow Syrophoenicians, Jesus was clearly of the wrong tribe.

With fear and trembling, and deep humility, the woman came, as had many others before, pleading for the life of her daughter. We who are parents can identify. When the lives of our children are in danger, tribe no longer matters, nothing really matters but finding a cure. This dear woman had heard of Jesus’ power and she had faith that he could set her daughter free from the demon which plagued her. We have seen such scenes before and there will be others later. We know what Jesus will do because Jesus meets all with grace and compassion. He looks at the woman and then replies, ***“Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and give it to the dogs.”***  And here is where my sermon title comes in, huh?

There may be no encounter in all the gospels which is more dissected, debated, argued over and analysed. Why? Because it seems to fly in the face of everything Jesus was about. There are all sorts of attempts to unravel this mystery, none of which, to my mind, are completely satisfactory. So rather than fall down that rabbit hole I am going to focus on the lesson that is clear and which challenges each of us as we seek to follow Jesus.

One thing is certain, none of the disciples, none of the Jewish faithful who lived in the house would have found Jesus words to be particularly troubling. This woman was not one of them, not of their tribe, and she was an annoyingly precocious woman after all. Who did she think she was barging in like that while Jesus was seeking some down time? And it had been made clear to the Jewish faithful that it was their tribe which was especially chosen by God and to whom Jesus had been sent with the message of grace and salvation. So it made perfect sense that he would turn away this gentile.

But something unexpected happen. Unexpected things often happen when Jesus is around. The woman would not be deterred. She was convinced that Jesus could heal her daughter, her gentile daughter. With great wisdom, and a bit of dry wit she replied. She didn’t argue, she didn’t take offense at Jesus’ words, she said with great respect, ***“Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the crumbs which drop.”*** And her daughter was healed as Jesus honored her for her tenacity and her faith. At the end of the day I am still a little puzzled about that harsh sounding response. If I had to choose an explanation it would probably be that Jesus was intentionally using this incident to shock his companions into recognizing the error of their extreme tribal ways, but that is just one option.

However you choose to explain that part of the story, I see two important lessons for us all in Jesus’ ultimate response and in the woman’s tenacity. That gentile woman offers us an amazing picture of humble faith. She is absolutely convinced that Jesus can heal her daughter and she is not to be denied. But she doesn’t take offense when Jesus responds harshly, she wisely responds in such a way that Jesus rewards her faith. In the example of that dear woman we find a challenging example of how we are called to approach our Lord. We are to have absolute faith and we are to be guided by a sense of humility and awe. And if we are, we can be certain that God will bring that perfect measure of wholeness that only God knows to be our need. It may not be what we want, but it will be what we need.

In Jesus’ response to the woman’s clever retort we find one of the first times in the gospel that it becomes clear the message of restoration, hope and wholeness which Jesus came to share is meant not only for God’s chosen Hebrew people, but is available to all who have faith. We find in this scripture a subtle challenge. It is the challenge to lay aside our tribal instincts and to recognize that we are all children of God, loved equally and called to respect one another. That message is reflected in the lectionary text from James for this week. In chapter two of James the writer calls partiality sin and reminds the reader of the ancient call of God to ***“Love our neighbours as ourselves.”*** Then James declares that mercy triumphs over judgement. For that a Syrophoenician was no doubt grateful. For that we all ought to be grateful.

Back in the days before GPS many of us would go to AAA and get routing information before heading out on our journeys. I particularly liked those Triptiks. Do you remember those top bound spiral collections of relatively short stretches of highway. They were really easy to follow. When AAA set up your route there would also be regular maps with your route marked in red to help you get the big picture. Imagine you had requested a route to the beach, say to Panama City. You open up your map and find the red line takes you from Daleville to Brundidge, to Auburn then over to Interstate 85, back down through Phenix City to 431 and finally to PCB. You would definitely be wondering what they had been drinking at the AAA office.

Well another “huh?” moment in our scripture could easily be overlooked. I has to do with Jesus chosen route to return to the shore of the Sea of Galilee. We read that he returned by traveling from Tyre to Sidon on the way to the Decapolis on the shore of the sea. That route is similar to our mythical Triptik. Jesus and the disciples went north to go south. We are not given any explanation. But I think there is a lesson there for each of us. I suspect most, if not all, of us have discovered during our faith journeys that Jesus rarely takes us from one place to the next by the route we would choose. But we always arrive where God would have us be and we can rest assured that God was with us, is with us and will be with us even if we don’t always understand the travel plans.

A final “huh?” moment for me comes when Jesus’ directs the man made whole and his friends to keep quiet about the wonderful healing which he has experienced. There are a number of times in the gospels when Jesus says similar things. One theory among scholars is that these moments are all about timing, that it was not yet the proper time for Jesus power and mission to be fully revealed. Another thought is that Jesus wanted to avoid becoming known primarily as the source of miraculous physical healing. The healings were not the primary focus of his ministry, they were simply one example of his desire to bind up those who were broken, to bring healing to all who were in distress and to offer hope, God’s grace, and eternal salvation to all people, even those under the table. As the men met for our weekly discussion of the texts on Wednesday we even wondered if Jesus might have been using a bit of reverse psychology. After all, what better way to crank up the gossip mill than to begin a story by saying, ***“You have to promise me you will not tell anyone!”***

I don’t know precisely why Jesus said that to the man and his friends. But as I thought about the response of the group I was struck by their exuberance. We read that they were astounded beyond measure, or as The Message says they were beside themselves with excitement. Jesus had restored a broken man to fullness. Now he could return to a normal life, he could again hear what folks were saying to him and he could speak to his family and friends for the first time.

For this fellow the touch of the Master had brought about literal and physical healing, his ears had been opened and his tongue loosened. Yet not all of us are promised physical healing. We all know folks who have disabilities and who love God and Jesus yet have not had their physical challenges taken away. We are not promised physical healing, but we are told we can all be made whole. You see spiritual wholeness has nothing to do with our physical wellbeing. I know some phenomenal physical specimens, folks with incredible health and great strength who are sorely lacking when it comes to spiritual health. Despite their appearance some of them are emotionally broken, wracked by fear, anxiety, anger, hatred. I know others who struggle daily with disabilities which severely limit their activities, yet who reflect the love of Christ and the grace of God with astounding brightness, broken of body but whole in spirit.

We are not promised physical healing, yet we are promised spiritual wholeness if we will but allow God to lead and direct us, if we will answer the call to follow the example of Christ. We do so as we share the gospel message in word and deed, with a world that needs to know that they are loved unconditionally and are called to love unconditionally in return. And in return we will find wholeness no matter how broken our physical bodies might be.

Maybe there is an example here for us in the reaction of the fellow and his group of friends. Despite being told not to say anything, because of the joy that filled their hearts, they could not contain themselves, they could not avoid sharing the good news. What about us? By the grace of God we are here today, bound up, redeemed and adopted into the kingdom of God, sisters and brothers of Christ. And no one has told us to keep quiet. In fact Jesus has given us a command as well. Jesus final word to those who seek to be his disciples was, ***“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”***

As we prepare to come to the table, here to partake of holy elements, may we be reminded of the call to take within us symbols of the very spirit of Jesus, not only so that we might be strengthened and made whole, but also that we might be equipped to be the body of Christ for a world which needs healing. For your sake, for the sake of all God’s children and for the sake of the kingdom of the Father of us all, let it be so. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.