



Pastor Ken Nelson's Sermon

SERMON – 15TH PENTECOST

MARK 7:24-37

SEPTEMBER 5, 2021

“TRADITION...AND DESPERATE HOUSEWIVES”

They say there are two phrases too frequently heard in churches. The first says *“nothing should EVER be done for the first time!”* The second is *“once in a while we can do something for the first time... just not NOW!”* We read wrongly the story of Jesus and the woman of Syria - Phoenicia if we read it as if our is Lord doing something for the first time.

In this truly amazing story of Jesus and a Greek woman with a demon possessed daughter many are scandalized by our Lord referring to someone as a “dog.” But in Mark 7 Jesus is in a “no bones about it” mood and was now taking head on the ethnic and gender prejudices of his culture – presumably alive and well in his own disciples. So, he uses the derisive term “dog” as Isaiah 56:11 uses it – to describe non-Jewish people who never get their fill of evil. But he does so in order to toss that term back in the laps of his men. The thinking goes our Lord is doing with his closet followers what he’d done with Jewish leaders earlier in Mark 7 – exposing their practice of dividing people between good and evil based on what they eat...how they wash...etc. In the case of this woman then, it was about where she was born. She’s not one of us. So what?

Another approach to this story is to spin the encounter with some linguistic sleight of hand. The Greek term translated as “dog” can also mean “small puppy” – not the ravenous street creature Isaiah spoke of. So understood, our Lord is almost using a term of endearment with this woman – she is someone who should be tended to, though maybe not with the same urgency as household members. Here the thinking goes there is enough Jesus for everybody...who goes first is not the point. A third option – a product of modern sensibilities regarding gender and ethnicity says this story is a “comeuppance” for our Lord – a “teaching moment” for the teacher who needed a reminder he was to be Savior of all people and this woman was just the sort to reveal that to him. *“Oh”, you can hear Jesus say to himself, “so this is what the angels meant when they said, ‘behold I bring good news of great joy to all people’.”* You get the idea!

Regardless, the 7th chapter of the gospel of Mark is understood as one in which Jesus “broke the rules”. There is a fascination with the Jesus described in this chapter. Jesus the humanist emerges, placing human need above religious identification and traditions. This Jesus might even have one of those “coexist” bumper stickers on his electric vehicle – that word, if you’ve not seen said sticker, spelled out using the symbols of all the world’s religions. Thus, in this episode of “a desperate housewife”, our Lord sniffs at tradition (*meeting with a female non-Jew who’d been defiled by the demon possessed daughter back in her living room*) in favor of love.

The traditions of our faith should surely never be more important than fellow human beings. After all, it is said the true test of a religion is what happens to people who live under it. James 1:27 says *“religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this; to look after orphans and widows in their distress.”* Jesus affirmed that in this chapter when he condemned the Pharisee’s practice of “corban” – the tying up of someone’s pledge of an offering with religious strings rendering it unavailable if needed to support the giver’s parents. That was tradition above need. That was religion under which people did not fare well.

So, what does this story mean for us? This congregation has a mission statement – raise your hand if you think you know what it is! *“Living and sharing the life changing message of Jesus Christ.”* Notice please that we’ve imbedded in who we are and why we say we exist the word “change.” But by that we mean the change Jesus brings in a person. I applaud our inclusion of the word “living” in our mission statement – for from its inception the tradition of the Christian faith has been that the truth of the Gospel was something to be “lived.” The test of a religion is how people live because of it.

“Lived” faith was the church’s ‘tradition’ and mission – the living enabled the sharing... sharing was preceded by and ever dependent upon living. So relax folks...our mission statement is NOT telling us to do anything for the first time! A 1st century Christian document – an extended sermon of sorts called 2nd Clement says, *“when pagans hear from our mouths the oracles of God and marvel at their beauty...and then discover that our works are not worthy of the words we speak, (the words) turn from wonder to...myth and delusion.”*

The true test of a religion is what happens to people who live under it. The story of the woman of Syria-Phoenicia teaches us that profoundly. The woman was desperate – you would be too if you were in her shoes...or those of Jairus the synagogue ruler whose 12 year old daughter lay dying or the woman who lunged for Jesus’ cloak because she hadn’t stop bleeding for 12 years, or the parents with pious Jewish kids whose life savings were now in the clutches of temple tradition.

The church like a culture can’t just jettison tradition – if we do we’d become what writer Elton Trueblood called a *“cut-flower civilization”* – meaning that trying to remain a morally good and responsible people without a grounding God is like trying to keep cut flowers alive in a vase of water. They don’t last no matter how often you change the water or how much flower food you dump in. In our lesson today, Jesus used an encounter with a woman to rebuke a separatist Jewish tradition that was lukewarm about human need. Their wonderful Law and traditions had become to outsiders...myth and delusion. Or...Jesus used this encounter to call his disciples back to what their tradition intended all along. When it’s all said and done...fancy interpretations and symbolism aside, this story is pretty simple...a person in need delivered from her suffering because of the faith in Christ of someone else.

The true test of a religion is what happens to people who live under it. In this story, Jesus shows us how the commandment to *‘love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul, mind and strength and your neighbor as yourself’* IS the tradition of the church and are indistinguishable.

AMEN