

*“Insisting on Grace”*

*Mark 7:24-37*

*September 6, 2009*

Many of you have shared with me that one of the most important things we do in our worship here at Pebble Hill is to take the time to invite people to share joys and concerns that we then lift in prayer. We are a praying people, believing that God’s power is at work among us and in our world. And so we pray that God’s healing power would meet the needs we bring and express – to heal the sick, comfort the bereaved, bring justice to the oppressed, and peace where there is war. We ask God to hear our prayers, and we take Jesus at his word when he says, “Come to me” – approach me, bring to me all that weighs on you, tears at you, all that divides you from one another and from me. When we do this, of course, we cannot dictate how these things might be accomplished. Surely part of our prayer has to be that God would accomplish them through us. We’ve got to be active participants in the process or our prayers won’t have much weight to them. But yet we also pray, “thy will be done” – in other words, we don’t set the terms with God. Our part is to bring the need and be open to the movement of God’s Spirit within us and among us.

Our gospel reading this morning gives us a double shot – two brief healing stories that give us a double opportunity to consider God’s power at work among us. They have much in common. Both episodes take place in Gentile territory, among “foreigners” who do not share the faith or religious practices of Israel. They take Jesus beyond his own ethnic enclave, and Jesus gives care and attention to those who would have been considered “heathens” to faithful Jews – but even he has to be stretched to do so. Right away we need to see the challenge to any Christian congregation to reach beyond the ethnic homogeneity that characterizes most of our churches, to worship and minister with persons different from ourselves. A recent study by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research shows that growth in church attendance is more likely to occur among congregations that are multiracial and develop a clear sense of outreach and mission.

Another thing these episodes have in common is that the persons who are healed do not approach Jesus alone but are aided by others. The young girl is freed of demon possession because her mother pleads to Jesus on her behalf. The deaf man is brought to Jesus by friends who beg for his healing. We are reminded here to approach Christ on behalf of others and actively seek the well-being of those who need help and care.

But the two healing episodes tell us different things about how God's healing power comes into human life. The Syrophenician woman is very aggressive in insisting that Jesus can heal her daughter. She shows a lot of "chutzpa" in the way she comes back at Jesus' statement that it isn't fair "to take the children's food (Israel) and throw it to the dogs." She responds, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Jesus was moved by her argument, and as Matthew tells the story, Jesus attributes the healing of the woman's daughter to the mother's "great faith." In the second scene, the healing of the man who was deaf and had an impediment in his speech, the man is completely passive. Others bring him to Jesus and Jesus works on him as if the man himself had nothing much to do with it. There's no reference to faith, or to anything that he brought to their meeting. Just his need.

So if we're looking to draw some kind of conclusion about what brings the healing power of God into human life, what the key might be – we won't find an easy answer here. If we want to make the point that God only responds to our need through the power of our faith and belief in him, we might look to the first story to prove our point. But then the second story would seem to question it.

I think what this points to is that our faith is not just one thing. Sometimes our faith needs to be like a rock, helping us to stand fast in the midst of everything around us swirling about in confusion and uncertainty. Sometimes our faith needs to stand on conviction. We might think of Martin Luther's famous response to his inquisitors: "Here I stand, I can do no other." But that can't be all that faith is. For some, that seems to be the case. There are rules that always apply, behaviors that are always wrong, standards that should never waiver from the truth. Surely there are times when we need to stand fast. But there are also times when God would have us move off where we are standing. Jesus demonstrated that in his own ministry, and this

encounter with the Syrophenician woman was one of them. His initial response to her (“dogs”) strikes us as harsh today, but it was imbedded in rock-solid convictions of the day that had been observed for centuries. She was a woman and a Gentile from the wrong side of the tracks. And people who suffered from blindness, deafness, or withered limbs had little or no status. These things were thought by many to be the consequences of sin, and those inflicted with them were often barred from the social and religious institutions of the day. You can almost see Jesus’ disciples nodding in agreement with him when he responded to the woman in this way: “That’s right, Jesus! That’s the way it is!”

Sometimes we need to stand on conviction, and sometimes we need to move off where we are standing. Having said that, we also need to be aware that we can open ourselves and our faith to so much of the currents of the world that we end up not standing much of anywhere. Ironically, Jesus implies as much in his initial response to the woman who comes seeking healing for her daughter - “It isn’t fair,” he says, “to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.”

Being “fair” seems to be the hallmark of an enlightened and morally sensitive person and society today. There are a lot of things that aren’t fair of course, but the problem with fairness is that everybody has their own idea of what it is. Kids are great at pointing out what isn’t fair, when it comes to their own wants and desires – what they want to do and what they don’t want to do.

The writer Anne Lamott defended her practice of making here (then) fourteen year old son go to church, even though he hated it. She was bombarded by critics who accused her of child abuse and brainwashing. Her response was that we live in bewildering times and a little spiritual guidance never hurt anyone. Besides, she wrote, teenagers left on their own would opt out of many things they don’t enjoy, like homework or flossing their teeth. “It’s good to do uncomfortable things. It’s weight training for life.” Lamott knows that God also loves teenagers that don’t go to church, but such teens, she says, are deprived of seeing people love God back. “Learning to love back is the hardest part of being alive.” She also made her son go to the church’s youth group. Youth “want guides who know how to act like an adult but with a kid’s heart. They want people who will sit with them and talk about the big questions.”

It “isn’t fair” that some kids should have to go to church while their friends get to sleep in on Sunday morning, or have fun doing something else. By extension, then, it’s “not fair” that some people get terrible illnesses, or die in car crashes, or . . . and others don’t. For many, that’s where faith stops, when the universe does not correspond to our own sense of fairness, and God’s does not intervene to make it right. That’s the deal breaker!

But the woman who came to Jesus begging for her daughter’s life didn’t stop. She insisted on grace! She insisted that mercy should overcome human conviction. She insisted that what was apparently so and always had been and always would be should not determine what Jesus could do now. She wasn’t so much demanding that her own dignity be recognized in a society and a religion that relegated her to a second-class status. She was calling upon the power of God to drive the demons from her daughter’s body, insisting that Jesus could do it: “Give me some crumbs, Jesus. There’s enough of God to go around. Don’t tell me that there isn’t!”

Do we think there is enough of God to go around? When we break the bread and share the cup of communion we say there is. With five loaves and two fishes Jesus fed a multitude. With spit and sighing prayer he opened a man’s ears. With barely more than a crumb of bread and a sip of wine he gives us life. With a faith that doesn’t passively rely on convention or wait to see if God will be fair to us, but a faith that insists on the freeing power of love and the forgiving power of mercy and the healing power of compassion – a faith that moves toward what God has promised even as we do not see it – this is a faith that saves.

God loves you. Love God back by insisting on God’s goodness and love, and by giving yourself to it.

Amen.