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Sermon 6 SEPT 2020

JSW 5: Jesus Says WHAT About the Syrophoenician Woman?

AUDIO: (announcer) It's time to gather your friends and family, get out your Bibles and your sermon notes, and open your hearts and minds, because this is another Sunday sermon in a series called "and then, Jesus says what?"

Good morning, good morning. We are so thankful that you have joined us today—we hope that you'll commit to having "church at home" with us in this virtual space--and make an effort to gather with friends or with family as you are able, and we know that the Spirit will be present with us all, binding us together in the love of God.

Today is the fifth Sunday in our sermon series called "and then. . . Jesus says WHAT?"

For the last four weeks we have been looking at, and thinking about, and studying together, some of the more difficult statements that are ascribed to Jesus in the gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John-- things that Jesus says that can be a bit confusing, or easy to misinterpret.

And as we said before this series is NOT simply about providing the answers to "what does this mean" or "what's the correct interpretation" of these statements—it's also about considering HOW we read the Bible, and what we do when we find things in the Bible—even words that come straight from the mouth of Jesus-- that might not be easy to understand, things that are not obvious or straightforward, but challenging—even difficult.

And we began on August 9th by looking at Chapter 10 of Matthew's gospel, and the title of that sermon was "Jesus says WHAT about peace?" because we saw that as Jesus talks with his disciples, he says: I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. And as we looked at what that meant, we considered the way that Jesus speaks prophetically and we saw how the words of the prophet are met

with division and conflict and sometimes with rejection and even persecution and execution--and we saw how Jesus was preparing his disciples to experience that kind of reaction when they followed his example

And then the next week we looked at chapter 14 of Luke's gospel, and our sermon was called "Jesus says WHAT about parents?" and we learned about the Greek word "*miseo*" and we saw that even though the idea of hating your parents and family and your life sounds extreme, even shocking, it was part of the way that Jesus was telling the crowds who listened to him that there was a difference—a BIG difference—between being a FOLLOWER of Jesus and someone who is just tagging along to watch the show. Being a follower of Jesus means saying "I'd rather have Jesus than anything"—even family, life, and possessions

The next week was titled "Jesus says WHAT about the Poor" because we looked at John's gospel, where Jesus says "you'll always have the poor with you," and we looked at what that statement means and what it doesn't mean, and we saw that Jesus was alluding to the Torah--the book of Deuteronomy--but we also looked at the contrast between the way that Judas and Mary respond to Jesus presence--Judas, from his critical perspective of scarcity and greed and hypocrisy, and Mary as a true disciple--showing extravagant, sacrificial love and an absolute trust in God's provision that is met with the transforming grace of Jesus

Last week we looked at what Jesus said about parables, when he told the disciples and those with him that for those outside, everything comes in parables IN ORDER THAT seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand or repent and find forgiveness. And after we learned about what parables are and how the parable of the sower was the "key" to the parables, we saw that Jesus was quoting the Prophet Isaiah, and we saw that once again we were hearing about the way that the prophetic proclamation of the gospel can be met with acceptance and faith, or with

rejection--it can fall onto good soil where it bears fruit or it can fall onto inhospitable soil, where it dies. And we heard that we are called, also, to be sowers of the word, like Jesus.

So we've asked the question "Jesus says WHAT" about peace, about parents, about the poor and about parables. We've had 4 Ps in a row but I'm breaking that trend with a "S." In Jesus says WHAT about the Syrophonecian woman.

Today we're looking at the story of the Syrophonecian woman in Mark chapter 7. The story where Jesus appears to insult a woman who comes to him for help by telling her "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Now, we've seen Jesus call people names – for example, in the book of Matthew, chapter 23 Jesus gives the Pharisees a right talking to calling them hypocrites, snakes, brood of vipers, and blind guides. But this, if this is an intentional insult of a woman who has come to Jesus with a very real need, this seems a little out of character for Jesus.

Let's take a look at what's happened between chapter 4 and this story in chapter 7. Last week we followed Jesus to the Sea of Galilee where he began to teach in parables. Afterward, Mark tells us that Jesus continues to teach and preach, cast out demons, heal the sick and resurrect the dead, John the Baptist has been killed and just before our story takes place, Jesus feeds a crowd of five thousand with only five loaves and two fish. His popularity has grown so great that he is recognized everywhere and because of that he really can't rest – Throughout the book of Mark, Jesus tries to get away to rest and instead, draws crowds – crowds that were searching for healing and wholeness, and crowds that were plotting to kill him. So he leaves Galilee and goes to the region of Tyre. Tyre and Sidon were cities of Phoenicia under Roman rule. It was the "seaside". Tyre and Sidon were not friends of Israel, though. In the not so recent past, they'd paired up with Israel's enemies – they were rivals. They had their own kings, their own gods and their own money. I'm sure many of you have heard of Jezebel the evil wife of King Ahab. Jezebel is known for many awful things, but one thing in particular she's known for is promoting the worship of idols (particularly Baal). Jezebel was also from Phoenicia. So this was

a place where Israelites didn't go – in fact, a good Jew wouldn't dare step foot in this area. It was considered Unclean, Pagan, Gentile. – AND a place where Mark tells us “Jesus entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there.” He's escaping the crowds. He's incognito. He's seeking peace and quiet in a seaside town – seclusion in a place where he wouldn't be recognized.

Now, this is the second time Jesus has gone into Gentile territory in the book of Mark and in both instances he's met with demon possession. The first episode is in chapter 5 where we meet Legion – the demoniac who lived among the tombs where no one could restrain him anymore – even with shackles and chains. Night and day among the tombs, he would howl and bruise himself with stones.

Mark 5:9 says “Then Jesus asked him, “What is your name?” He replied “My name is Legion: for we are many”. Mark tells us that Jesus cast the demons out into a herd of 2000 pigs. And that the pigs rushed down a steep bank into the sea and were drowned.

After this happened, – Mark tells us “people from the city and the country” came to see what happened - they were afraid – and begged Jesus to leave – except, of course, for the man made clean from demons. He begged to go with Jesus but instead, what did Jesus say to him? In Mark 5:19 we read “But Jesus refused and said to him, “Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you.” And then in verse 20 “And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed. This man, this outsider – Theologian NT Wright calls him “the first apostle to the gentiles”. Imagine that – filled with demons one minute and an apostle the next. From unclean to clean. From lost to redeemed, restored, renewed. Sent out by the Messiah to proclaim the good news.

But the second visit to Gentile territory is where we find Jesus in our scripture for today.

So Mark says Jesus has entered a house but didn't want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice. In comes this woman – a woman that shows up TWICE in the Gospels. Her story

appears also in Matthew. Let's take a look at her for a moment. She's a woman, obviously and she's a mother. She's defined first as having a little daughter with an unclean spirit. Next she's defined as Gentile. In Jewish tradition, as you know, there were clean and unclean people. Some are unclean Jews – people who are lame, blind, lepers and so forth. Others, those who aren't Jews were considered unclean because they weren't God's chosen people – the Gentiles (that's her). She's also described as being of Syrophonecian origin – so she's from Jezebel's area of Phoenicia – which made her a rival to Israel - with her own king, her own gods, her own money. This is someone Israelites wouldn't dare talk to - much less be near her lest they become soiled by her uncleanness.

I wonder if she'd heard the former demoniac missionary preaching of Jesus' miracles? Remember, in Mark 5:19 Jesus told him "Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you." I wonder if this may have influenced her decision to seek Jesus out in his hiding place?

So here's Jesus, trying to escape the crowds for some peace and quiet – for some rest. And all of a sudden, there's this woman, a Gentile woman, a woman from a land that isn't friendly AT ALL with Israel, an UNCLEAN woman, bowing at his feet begging for him to cast the demon out of her daughter. On so many levels, she was uninvited – an intruder – an outsider – unclean.

I think that sometimes it's difficult for us to grasp the Old Testament ideas of "Unclean" – especially when it relates to people. Nowadays, we would never characterize someone as unclean because of a disability or their background or race. Or at least, we wouldn't say it out loud. But in thinking about how we categorize people ideologically – the unclean person might be someone whose ideas we consider are wrong, or dangerous or worrisome. That person who stands for certain causes we don't believe in. That person on the other side of the argument, that person who lives differently, believes differently, loves differently, or votes differently than we do. We might even believe that person isn't even worthy of us talking to them about precious things like our faith in Jesus Christ. When we look at

the world – in our daily lives – in our interactions with folks in person – and virtually in our interactions on social media – when we see the world– the men, women and children in our world– what if we could see them as neighbours, as community, beloved by God, worthy of the the gospel, so we share it openly, freely, without prejudice.

So here she is, this woman, bowing before Jesus begging him to cast the demon from her daughter. In verse 27 Jesus presents the woman with a parable. Last week we looked at Parables and in particular the parable of the sower about which Jesus offers an interpretation in which he says that the seed that the sower sows is the word, and the ones who receive the word may be receptive or not like good soil or rocky ground. Keep that in mind.

So Jesus says, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” This is our JSW statement for this week. What do we make of this? Is he calling this woman a dog? Some people say that what Jesus said was racist – that he is a product of his culture – that he’s influenced by the way that the people in his time and place think and that he’s echoing that way of thinking. Some people say that he was rude because he was annoyed with the woman, he’s tired, hungry, he’s frustrated and trying to get away from the crowds. He’s mourning the loss of John the Baptist. He wants some privacy and he wants some space and on top of everything else, it’s HOT in Phoenicia. And those are some ways of looking at the situation, but keep in mind, just one chapter earlier, Jesus and his disciples had fed the 5000. This incredible miracle where five loaves and two fishes turned into enough food to fill (to satisfy) everyone – with how many baskets left over? Yes, 12. 12 Baskets of fish and bits of bread – probably even lots of crumbs. That contradicts what he says here. There was enough for the crowd but none left for this woman? Jesus knew there was enough.

The Syrophenician woman is a Gentile, an outsider but turns around and answers Jesus with a parable of her own “Sir (the word used here is “Kurios” which means, Lord), Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” Notice how she changes the visual. Jesus has painted one

picture of taking food from children and throwing it outside to the dogs. She introduces a reference to a table – emphasizing that she doesn't want to deprive anyone of food, namely the children of Israel, but that there's enough for everyone to eat at the same time as we've just seen with those 5000 people in the crowd and Jesus himself has just seen.

If we look at other conversations in the Hebrew tradition, let's say Moses and God, Job and God, Peter and God in Acts chapter 10 – where Peter straight up said “By no means, Lord” am I going to eat the unclean animals that appear to him in a vision. Three times he tells God no. Those conversations look something, in context, like this one between Jesus and the woman. In Rabbinic tradition, it was very much encouraged for Rabbis to talk to each other this way – to argue – point, counterpoint. It's engagement working out the truth. Course, if a woman had spoken to a Pharisee in that way, she might have been stoned.

But Jesus invites her into a dialogue with him. He challenges her. He sets her up for success by elevating her to a higher position – treating her as He would another Rabbi. Offering her an opportunity to engage in this point/counterpoint discussion with him. He gives her a choice. She can either walk away or she can engage with him. And what does she do? She engages with him because, unlike the disciples, she understands the parables. In fact, she is the first person in Mark to hear and understand a parable. And she responds to his parable with a parable.

Jesus says “let the children be fed first for it isn't fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs” and she answers back, Oh but Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs. In other words, even crumbs from the table would be enough for our healing and salvation (we just saw this in the feeding of the 5000 – the abundance of the leftover crumbs!) but when it comes to the Messiah's bread, there's more than ENOUGH and the table is immeasurably larger than we can imagine and there's a seat for everyone. She sees the future sharing of food between Jews and

Gentiles. A new kingdom, where there's so much bread, so much abundance that it's spilling off of the table and feeding all of us.

She gets it. She has ears to hear. Jesus then says to her "For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter". It's also translated as "Because of this word go" the root used there for word is "logos". This is same root word that Jesus uses when he says that the seed sown in the parable of the sower is the word. Here we have a concrete example of Jesus sowing the word. And because of her words, her response to Jesus' parable, she's helped produce this outcome. How often do we forget the power of our words – even to engage with almighty God himself. She gets it. She can see the abundance of the kingdom. She doesn't see it all because it hasn't yet unfolded but she can see the beginnings – the preparation for things to come. And because of that, she becomes the voice who frees her daughter. She is the good soil that hears the word, accepts it and bears fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.

Last week we saw how Jesus' words about parables could be misinterpreted to mean that he was being intentionally deceptive, when in fact he was inviting those who heard his words to respond and follow his example. Similarly, Jesus words to the Syrophenician woman might be misinterpreted as uncooperative, even insulting, but we've seen that Jesus invites this outsider into dialogue – a dialogue that brings about transformation in her life and the life of her daughter. This dialogue brings freedom to the one who has been oppressed, healing to the one who was broken and hope to the one who was hopeless.

This morning, the Syrophenician woman reminds us that almighty God himself invites us into dialogue, invites us to have ears to hear, to receive the Sower's seed that is the word and to bear fruit in our lives and the lives of others. Will we, like the Syrophenician woman, have the courage to raise our voices in response to the call of Jesus?