

14th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 9.8.24

Mark 7:24-37

From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak." (667)

Tyre was a thought-balloon of a city. An island off the coast of ancient Phoenicia, it was connected to the mainland by a causeway. This, Alexander the Great built in the 4th century before Christ. The causeway (also called a mole) made it so he could take the city by force from the Persians. It also, incidentally, made it appear, when drawn on a map, like a mere thought of the mainland, like something Syria (as it's called today) was but imagining.

I wonder if this is what attracted Jesus to the place, that it was but notional, not quite real. Everyone needs a break from reality from time to time.

We're back in the Gospel according to Mark. Maybe you noticed. This is supposed to be Mark's liturgical year. During this year, Year B, we're supposed to follow the Gospel of Mark. Year A is Matthew's, Year B is Mark's, Year C is Luke's, which leaves John for special occasions—Lent, Easter. But Mark's gospel is short, so John also features in Mark's year, which is where we've been lately, these last six weeks with the Gospel of John.

Now we're back with Mark, which means we need to adjust our expectations. The readings will be shorter or will seem like two readings in one, same length as normal but twice the action. They'll also move, as if to keep pace with Jesus, if but barely.

Which might be why, having tired himself out, he wanted (apparently) to get away: “From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there.”

Tyre is the furthest away Jesus is remembered to have gone from his home region, Galilee—the furthest away, that is, until he went to Sidon, which is further still, north even of Tyre. This, you’ll notice, means it doesn’t make much sense, that Jesus returned to his home region from Tyre by way of Sidon. It’s like saying I returned home to the Berkshires from Minnesota by way of Nebraska.

But the fact that he went there in the first place is strange enough, went *away* there, away *alone* there, apparently, without the crowds, without even the disciples; went away “and entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there.”

Or maybe not so strange.

Mark’s gospel is the only one that presents Jesus as not having come into the world with something divine about his nature. Mark’s is the only one to present Jesus as having been revealed as the Christ in his young adulthood. Matthew and Luke both give us nativity narratives, something astonishing about him evident at his birth, at his *conception*. Doing one better, John’s gospel confesses Jesus as there in the beginning when God began to create, there not so much as Jesus the man but as the Word of God, the *logos*, the logic of all that is. Mark, though: according to this narrative, Jesus is proclaimed to be the Christ at his baptism, which was when he was maybe thirty years old.

What’s more, the voice that came from heaven to make this proclamation at his baptism is remembered not to have addressed the crowd gathered at the river, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” No, the voice from heaven according to Mark addressed Jesus himself: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” It’s as if this might have been news to Jesus.

And, turns out, this news might not have been wholly good. No, turns out, belovedness was a big job, a surprisingly big job. Funny, we often assume being chosen is a privilege. But it could just as easily be a burden, an even terrible burden. As for the Messiah God seems to have had in mind, this wouldn’t be a mere regional savior, would be rather something he’d carry with him everywhere. Everywhere he went he’d have a powerful impact and would attract clamoring, desperate, needy crowds—people who needed saving, people who needed healing, people who needed loved ones rescued from dire straits, people who couldn’t even manage to see after their

own hunger, so secondary was such a concern (it seems) to the more pressing urge to follow Jesus even to a deserted place at sundown just to be in his presence.

So, he wanted to get away. He'd been healing and restoring, going here and going there, from this side of the sea to the other side of the sea, among Jews, among Gentiles, feeding crowds while night fell, calming storms while waves rose and swamped the boats the disciples were relying on. And now he meant to get away. And Tyre would do just fine for that—this *thought* of a place. No one would recognize him here. No troubles would find him here.

Tyre was busy, wealthy, beautiful, *away*.

A colleague was once telling me about the disappointing decision a couple had made to leave the church he was serving. They met with him, as he was the pastor, to explain their decision. Things were getting too political in the church, they explained. Every week there was talk of something political, something troubling—which was funny to my friend because he doesn't feel himself to be a particularly political preacher. I mean, there are always those implications, but that's rarely his starting point and rarely his end.

But, see, this couple had just come back from an extended vacation, three months away in beautiful, peaceful Bosnia. Or was it Serbia? My friend couldn't remember.

I cracked up at this, which shook him out of his lament. "Bosnia's peaceful?" I asked. "Not twenty years ago, it was devouring itself in an ethnic war."

"Well, maybe it's better now?" my friend wondered.

"Yeah, or maybe that couple didn't speak the language, and didn't know that people's lives are complicated in Bosnia, too. That's not just here. It's everywhere."

But not on vacation. On vacation, you don't have ethnic strife. On vacation, you don't even have to go to the dentist or do your laundry.

So, some time away in distant Tyre.

But who'd have thought that Tyre would be as real a place, as filled with people facing pressing problems as any place in and around Galilee?

And who'd have thought Tyre would be a place where Jesus would be recognized?

It's not clear how this woman had come to hear of Jesus. She was a Gentile, so she likely had little in the way of messianic expectation. She wasn't *looking* for the messiah, the distinctly Jewish messiah. What's more, she lived in a place not occupied as cruelly as Galilee was. She was probably relatively wealthy, relatively safe. Her life was probably a pretty good one. Compared to the lives of those living in and around Galilee, her life was probably marked even by luxury.

But she did have this one problem. She did have this one urgent, desperate need. Her little daughter had an unclean spirit and likely suffered terribly from that—the sort of thing that would make all the power and wealth in the world come to nothing. Not many parents can tolerate the suffering of their children.

For this, she “immediately heard about Jesus.”

Immediately: there it is again. Mark uses this term a lot: “immediate,” “immediately,” to call to mind those occurrences that seem to have no cause other than an unmediated revelation—an arrival of insight, a surprising intimacy, a deep experience, the truth.

This is how that woman heard about Jesus. As if coming of this pressing need—her little daughter now sick with a demon, she immediately heard about Jesus, that he was near, and that he was someone who could *do* something about it or could have an effect for the good about it, whether from his doing something or from his very being something, something powerful, something present.

And so he did, or so he was.

...but not before one of the uglier incidents remembered in the life of Jesus.

He implied this woman was a dog, she and her daughter both. When she asked for the healing presence of the kingdom of God that was Jesus for the sake of his people, he replied dismissively, cruelly even: ““Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

And there have been attempts to make it seem less awful than it was. Preachers like me have explained this as hyperbole typical to the rhetorical habits of the Ancient Near East. Or we’ve supposed him to be testing the woman—testing her for resilience, persistence, faith.

This, of course, would itself be problematic, manipulative, even cruel in its own way. So, some will go further to explain that Jesus knew she would pass the test, so it wasn’t all that manipulative because, you know, he could just tell about her and it would make a good story for telling later, a moral-of-the-story sort of story, that we should have such resilient faithfulness as this woman did.

But, nope, still bad, still using someone for some purpose other than one’s intrinsic purpose. Which isn’t to mention that this would be to read a lot into the text—like, that Jesus and this woman had somehow arranged this whole thing, of which there is no evidence or no coherent net reason.

I'm sorry to have to say, the text itself seems quietly to insist that Jesus didn't expect to find much of humanity beyond his own people, or at least didn't expect to be responsible for what humanity lay beyond his own people, didn't expect to have it pressed upon him to be responsive to them.

Because what were they to him? What problem of his were they? I mean, we all have our limits. We can each only do so much. There's a man who calls me from time to time for money from the (Church on the Hill's) pastor's discretionary fund. Turns out he calls from faraway Watertown, on the other side of the state. I hadn't known that when I first agreed to help way back in 2020. Since then, I always tell him, let me help you find connections there. I can't help you from here. You're not one our people (whatever that means). He calls less and less frequently as time goes on, but I do still hear from him every few months.

No, we all have our limits.

Not, though, apparently, the Christ. No, because apparently the Christ is Christ for the world.

But this world is big, and its problems are persistent and pervasive, and from these problems there really is no "away," not for any of us, we're learning these days. There is "away" when it comes to global climate change. There is no "away" when it comes to regional wars like in Gaza. Everywhere there's entanglement. Entanglement! See, the geopolitical imagination is finally catching up with the theoretical physical imagination, mid-twentieth century physicists seeing in their calculations the true fact of reality being a sticky web of entanglement. They were, though, catching up to the theological, the Christological: Christ is Christ for the world.

There was a time when such a thing would have unimaginable. There was a time when such a thought would literally have been unthinkable. A savior for the whole world, a manifestation of love for all people, all history, all creation: the *salvator mundi*, the *pantokrator*. A pressing past even the outermost boundary of the felt world, a pressing beyond all boundaries this urgency of love, a pressing upon us the challenge of imagination and empathy: there was a time when that would have been wildly fantastical beyond anything people would have actually lived and felt on the daily.

The time when that changed from unthinkable to unavoidable might well have been this moment of immediacy with this woman.

It might have moreover been *because* of this woman, this woman of faraway Tyre, this woman and her impassioned concern for her daughter.

She did that. She made Jesus, Christ for the world at least as far as he was concerned—because, you see, from this vacationland, Jesus returned to reality, but, crucially, he did so by way of Sidon, which was further away still than faraway Tyre, and which is therefore to imply that his return was in some actual, active recognition that home for him was the whole wide world. His sphere of concern was the whole world. His sphere of good effect was to be the whole world. He was to be responsible for this whole thing. He was, and is, to be responsive to this whole thing—

which means so are we. We who mean to follow him, we who mean to be identified by him and with him, are responsible for, and to be responsive to, one another and this whole thing.

It's a lot.

It's a lot, I know, and on this mild Sunday when the press of summer, its heat and busyness, seems for the moment to have passed. Really, many of us might yet be on vacation, at least as far as our spirits are concerned. I can even hear you thinking it: "Let us squeeze this one of very few weekends in before it's fall and it's rainy and the darkness comes earlier and stays longer."

Okay. Take what time you need.

Which I say because, of course, where we meet the limits of our own living, Christ is yet Christ for the world. Where we cannot be such a thing, Christ is yet Christ for the world.

So, rest assured that Jesus is powerful to save where we ourselves are terribly limited. Yet also rise and act. Do the right thing—for we are the body of Christ, and Christ is Christ for the world.

Thanks be to God.