

A Service of Welcome

9-9-2012

Mark 7:24-37

24 Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret. 25 In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an evil spirit came and fell at his feet. 26 The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter. 27 "First let the children eat all they want," he told her, "for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs." 28 "Yes, Lord," she replied, "but even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." 29 Then he told her, "For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter." 30 She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

31 Then Jesus left the vicinity of Tyre and went through Sidon, down to the Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis. 32 There some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk, and they begged him to place his hand on the man. 33 After he took him aside, away from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers into the man's ears. Then he spit and touched the man's tongue. 34 He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, "'Ephphatha!'" (which means, "Be opened!"). 35 At this, the man's ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly. 36 Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone. But the more he did so, the more they kept talking about it. 37 People were overwhelmed with amazement. "He has done everything well," they said. "He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak."

I think our scripture lesson this morning is a very fitting lesson particularly since we are welcoming Kelsey and Kayla to our Sunday morning worship. As we learned just a few moments ago, they are graduating today from Children's Worship and Wonder into our regular Sunday Morning worship services here at Hooker Memorial. Now, both of you girls know I would never pick on either one of you, right. Good, I'm glad you know that. Well, the truth be known, yeah, I would pick on them. I have in the past, and probably will in the future; it's just the way I am. If you both will, I would ask you to come up here this morning and help me with my sermon. See, actually, what I'm going to do is sit down, and let them preach this morning. No, not really. I want you to sit here in these two chairs and let me ask you some questions. That OK with you. Good; let's go. First question is to the Congregation; Kelsey and Kayla are like us, right? We have watched both of these young ladies grow up in this church. So you feel welcome here, right? Good, because you are. Are you like me? Boy v/s girl, in school, out of school, married v/s single, young v/s old: So, you probably aren't like me, right? OK then, let's see about someone else. How about Mr. Dennis, are you like him? No, well let's see. How about Ms. Nancy; she was here earlier talking about Worship and Wonder. Are you maybe like her? You are probably more like her than you are me if for no other reason she is a girl and so are both of you. Did you know she was my sister? Well she is. We have the same mother and father. Michelle is your sister, Kelsey and Kayla, Logan is yours. Even though both of you have sisters, you are both different from your sisters. We've established a lot of things here this morning. You both are different from me. But you are still welcome here in God's house, right? You are both different from Mr. Dennis, yet you are still welcome here. You are different from Ms. Nancy, and you are still welcome here. You are different from your sisters and you are still welcome here. Do you think it would be fair to say that no matter who you are, you are welcome in God's house. You're right, everyone is welcome in God's house. Thanks girls, you can go back to your seats now.

It was really pretty obvious that we would welcome Kayla and Kelsey to our worship service this morning. I mean, after all, they are part of us. Look at Kayla: Donna is her grandmother, Leigh Ann is her mother. She was born into this church. And Kelsey, your family started coming here when Michelle was in the fifth grade. Now she's a sophomore in college. That means you were somewhere around two years old when you started coming here. Richard, that means you're old. These two young ladies have been part of us all their lives, of course they're welcome here.

Some of you are looking up here and wondering what any of this has to do with this morning's scripture lesson. I think it is exactly the point of the lesson. I have done a number of Sunday morning worship messages concerning the miracles and healings written about just in the Gospel of Mark. Let's see: In the fourth chapter of Mark we talked about Jesus calming the stormy Sea of Galilee. In the fifth chapter we read about Jesus driving a demon out of a man, healing a woman with a bleeding disorder (and all she did was touch the hem of his robe), and he raised Jarius' daughter from the dead. In chapter six I briefly mentioned the feeding of the 5,000 with five loaves and two fish. I also mentioned Christ walking on water just after that miracle. Christ performing miracles and healing sick people by now is nothing new to us. Actually, it was nothing new to the Galilean people by this time in Jesus' ministry. Last week in the beginning of chapter seven, we saw how the Scribes and Pharisees had come down from Jerusalem and were trying to find anything to discredit Jesus. We saw once again how he turned the tables on them and discredited them with his answers to their questions. And, today we're in the latter half of chapter seven, Jesus has gone to Tyre trying to get some much needed rest. On a map of today, that area is southern Lebanon. There were a few Jews there, but the people of that area were as a rule, enemies of Jews. They were pagans. So Jesus went into a house and didn't want anyone to know he was there. Most biblical scholars agree that Jesus wasn't hiding from fear, he was just trying to go to an area where not many people knew who he was. He desperately needed some rest. Yet, as soon as he goes into a house, someone recognizes him and asks for healing. A woman wants Jesus to heal her daughter. Once again Jesus drives out a demon without even seeing the sick child. As soon as He had healed the little girl, Jesus left that region and went to an area known as the Decapolis. In that region, there were ten Roman cities. The Romans were also pagans and the Jews tried not to have any more contact with the Romans than was absolutely necessary. Surely no one would know him there. Yet, as soon as he arrives, someone brings him a beggar who is deaf and dumb. When I say dumb, I'm not talking about his mental capacity, I mean he was unable to speak. Once again, Jesus heals the man. Are we surprised? No, not really. Like I said a minute ago, healings are now common. There are several lessons within these few verses of scripture. Numerous sermons have been written concerning how Jesus spoke to the Greek Syrophenician woman. Entire sermons have been written on how Jesus healed her daughter without even seeing her or how she was healed because of her mother's faith. Still other sermons have been written about the healing of the beggar. Analogies have been made about how he could now hear the word so we who aren't deaf should be able to hear the word. In the same vein, analogies have been made concerning how a dumb man could now speak and spread the word, so we as persons who can speak should spread the word. All of these are very valid points and I'm not trying to downplay any of them. Yet, one thing I think we all need to pay particular attention to is the fact that these people were not Jews. Jesus first presented his ministry to the Jewish people and was not received as the messiah. In the beginning, Jesus developed a large following in Galilee. But as soon as the people found out what they had to do in order to receive Christ, they turned away. So what did he do, give up? We all know the answer to that, obviously no, he didn't. When he went to Tyre, he didn't turn away the Greek Syrophenician lady with the sick daughter. When he went to Decapolis, he didn't turn away the deaf, mute beggar. No, he healed them. And I think that is one of the main points to today's scripture lesson. Jesus welcomed everyone. Jesus was not concerned about nationality, about gender, about whether you were rich or poor, whether you were a saint or a sinner. Jesus welcomed everyone. Each Sunday morning after the sermon we partake in Communion. One of the things I try to say each time is this table is open to all who believe in Jesus Christ. Notice, I don't qualify that statement. It's not open just to members of Hooker Memorial. It's not open just to men. It's not open just to women. It's not open just to ... you fill in the blank. There are no age limits, no race requirements, no geographic requirements, no wealth requirements. The table is open to all who call Jesus Christ their Lord and Savior.

At first glance, our gospel lesson this morning seems rather bland— Jesus heals a woman's daughter then opens the ears of a deaf man. What's new about that? And so, our tendency is to take this scripture and lump it in with any number of other scriptures where Jesus does much the same thing. But, as we look closer, we see that the two places where Jesus performed these miracles are outside the boundaries of what we might call his Galilean ministry. The region of Tyre and Sidon is to the north, in present-day Lebanon. And the region of the Decapolis was to the east – present-day Jordan. Clearly, Jesus has expanded the boundaries of his ministry beyond Galilee to the surrounding region; more importantly, he's broadened the scope of his ministry to include both Jews and Gentiles.

I wonder what it would look like if I asked you to make a list of your ten best friends. Let's speed this up just a bit. Just list five. Now let's study the list. What is their gender, their race, their socio-economic status, their age, their religion, and by religion, I mean Christian v/s Jew, v/s Muslim, etc. Now compare that to your gender, your race, your socio-economic status, your age, and your religion. They pretty much match don't they? You all know the old saying, birds of a feather flock together. And I think that's relatively true. We are friends with people just like us. Where would we be today if Christ had stayed within the Jewish community? But he didn't, did he? As Christians, we are called to spread the good news of Jesus Christ. What is the Great Commission: Matthew 28: 18-20, **Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."** Christ himself told us to go to everyone and spread the good news.

We started our worship service this morning by welcoming Kayla and Kelsey into our regular Sunday morning service from Children's Worship and Wonder. As we end, I hope we can see that this service is open to everyone. Not just those who are just like us; all are welcome here. I pray that each one of us will follow the lead of Jesus Christ and get outside our comfort zone and welcome people who are different from us. Don't just tell your five best friends about your relationship with Jesus, they probably already know. Tell someone else. Then welcome them into the family of Christ.