

**The 23rd Sunday after Pentecost – September 4, 201 – The Rev. Elizabeth Colton
Mark 7: 24-37**

Today is the last day of our program year, in which we finish our focus on The Way of Love, as articulated by our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry. The seven steps are Turn, Learn, Pray, Worship, Bless, Go and Rest. “Turn,” the first step, invites us to a new way of thinking, an intentional pause to listen and to choose to follow Jesus. The step “Learn” is a reminder to nurture our decision to follow Jesus by devoting some time each day to the reading of scripture. And surely the most obvious way to learn how to follow Jesus is to continually read what he taught. The step “Pray” invites us to set aside time each day to dwell intentionally with God. Of course we have thanksgivings to offer, and petitions to make, but we’re also asked to spend time to just be with God. Every day. “Worship” is the next step, and that’s where we find ourselves today, a time of praise and thanksgiving, and of dwelling with God, not just in our own quiet time, but together, recognizing that we are incarnational people, meant to live in community. All of these steps nurture and prepare us for the next step, “Bless,” which invites us to bless others by sharing faith with them. Those are the friends you invite to church with you, the people with whom you share a “God moment. And then there’s “Go,” which sends us forth into the world. “Go in peace to love and serve the Lord” is a call to action, to live lives of service to others. And the last step is “Rest.” Even God rested on the seventh day of creation, and we are all called to experience restoration and rest. God’s peace is our gift. This is the Way of Love, and it more than a yearly theme, it is a Way of Life.

These steps make sense and give us a good roadmap for The Christian Life. Today we find Jesus at the “Rest” step. He is exhausted, and our evangelist Mark is very honest about this. Jesus was so tired, we are told, and that he did not want anyone to know he was there. And where is “there?” Not a household among the people of Israel, but a house in a mixed area where Jews and Gentiles lived, an area where Gentiles exploited the minority community of Jews. It’s an odd choice for a rest stop. In any case, he is hiding, yearning for the grace, peace and restoration that are part of what we have come to call “Rest.”¹ We are accustomed to seeing the divinity of Jesus, but here Mark gives us a very candid and rare look at the humanity of Jesus. Could it be, that like all of us, Jesus has lost sight of his mission for a moment, a moment of stress and exhaustion?

So perhaps it is no wonder that when this Gentile woman finds her way to Jesus, he is not receptive. Furthermore, she is not respectful of societal norms: she comes unaccompanied by a suitable male, she speaks to a man she does not know, and she is from a different tribe altogether. Jesus responds quickly and sharply, essentially calling her and her demon-possessed daughter “dogs.” Or, by extension, if you wish, that label by which all female dogs are called, which for us has become a derogatory term. Derogatory then, too, because no one had dogs for pets. Dogs were scavengers who lurked around the doors where food was served, and waited for scraps or crumbs to be dropped on the floor. They were pests who cleaned the floor and were then kicked out

¹ The Way of Love, The Episcopal Church Website: www.episcopalchurch.org/wayoflove

of the house. To call this woman a dog was worse than cruel and sarcastic. He was calling her less than human, much, much less than a child of God. Surely Jesus is caught off guard by this bold messenger, and he thinks first of his mission to the lost sheep of the House of Israel. "Nevertheless, she persisted!"² Her extraordinary faith impelled her to plead for her daughter.

Side by side, the gospel also tells us a magnificent healing story. Jesus has had quite a lot of trouble getting people to actually listen. He's sparred with the Pharisees, who challenged him about what was clean and unclean. He has fed a very large crowd of five thousand people, speaking about what the bread of life really is. Now a group brings him a deaf man who had a resulting speech impediment. And the fact that the healing story is about deafness is no accident. Jesus' disciples are frequently depicted as bad listeners, they have been as if deaf.

This man, however, is truly deaf. The faith of his friends has brought him, because of Jesus' reputation as a healer. Jesus took the man aside, not wanting the healing to be the central part of what the people remember: he wanted them to hear his teaching, not be dazzled by the miracle. First Jesus restored the man's hearing and then he spat upon his fingers and touched the man's tongue. There was an ancient belief that one's spit contained the essence of life. The ancients were prescient, one's spit does contain the essence of life, every last gene. Jesus looked up to heaven and sighed, and said to him, "Ephphatha", that is, "be opened." And of course, he said this to the man, but he said it also to God, with sighing, that his own hearing might be sharpened for the sake of all of humankind, that the kingdom God intended from the beginning might be restored.

And so we begin to see the beauty of this sequence of stories, which, at first, seemed to have little to do with each other. In the first story, Jesus is the deaf one. His own healing comes from an unlikely source, a frantic request coming from a woman any Jew would have dismissed as inappropriate and not credible. For Jesus, this healing is a jolting reorientation, a reminder that he came for all of humankind. In the second, Jesus restores another to hearing, one whose own jolting reorientation is to sound and speech, a return to wholeness and to his community.

Deafness is not just the physical inability to hear, it's the inability to listen. It can be brought on by fatigue and stress, when we cannot hear one more word, much less listen. Deafness often occurs when we consider the source and decide it is less than credible. But the message we do not want to hear so often comes from God, and serves as a reorientation to The Way of Love.

Finally, we must notice that in these two stories, neither the demon-possessed girl nor the deaf man sought Jesus out personally for healing. It was friends and family that sought healing on their behalf. It was the strength of faith that caused those people to

² "Nevertheless, she persisted" is an expression adopted in 2017 after the United States Senate voted to require Senator Elizabeth Warren to stop speaking during the confirmation of Senator Jeff Sessions as U.S. Attorney General. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell made this remark during his comments following the vote.

seek Jesus out and beg for healing for loved ones. It is faith that caused the Syrophenician woman to continue to argue and plead, even after being insulted and rebuffed.

Faith is a multifaceted crystal. When you look through different faces of the crystal, you see differently. And so it is singularly appropriate that as we wrap up The Way of Love, not as a practice, but only as a yearly focus, we turn to the importance of faith. Because as we see in these two stories, Faith Matters! Faith, persistent faith, can bring healing, from a distance as well as face to face. Faith can reorient our lives.

The invitation is open to next week's Kickoff Sunday when Frank introduces our new theme, and we begin a new year discovering the many facets of faith, and why it matters.