

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23

Psalm 146

James 2:12-17

Mark 7:24-37

September 8, 2024

SERMON:

A CHILD-LIKE FAITH

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: Unless you become like little children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

Our OT readings this morning stress the importance of treating people based on their relationship with God, rather than on accidental differences of wealth or status. And in his letter, James applies that same lesson to the young Christian churches under his leadership. The point he makes is pretty straightforward, that true faith involves walking the walk as well as talking the talk. The example he gives is one involving the attitude Christians are expected to have towards the poor. Jesus Himself showed no favoritism towards people based on their material well-being – if anything, he viewed the possession of riches and power as spiritual handicaps – and James criticizes those who, professing their faith in Jesus, nonetheless are treating people of obvious means with much more deference than those who are poor. In other words they were being hypocritical. They were claiming to be faithful followers of Jesus, but their actual behavior belied their claims. And so James concludes this passage with his famous maxim: *So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.*

What he is saying is simply that Christian faith should not be hypocritical, and that is certain a good lesson to keep in mind, but it doesn't really point to anything

special about Christian faith. You could easily imagine a rabbi preaching the same message to a Jewish congregation or an imam to a Moslem congregation, or a politician to a group of campaign workers, for that matter.

But as always, when we turn to the Gospels, we find Jesus teaching us something much deeper, much more important, and much more personal about the faith He's looking for. So let's read our passage for this morning together.

Mark 7:24-37

In Matthew's account of this same incident, he adds that, after listening to the woman's argument about even the little dogs getting the crumbs that fall from the table, Jesus turns to his disciples – all of them Jewish, by the way – and he says that's he's never seen a faith like this woman's in Israel. Mark doesn't mention that, but he makes it clear that there was something about this woman's words and the attitude they represent that profoundly affected Jesus, to the effect that He actually changed His mind. Her way of being faithful, in other words, was exactly what Jesus was looking for.

So what we're going to do this morning is look at this woman's faith, and that of the deaf man, which Mark immediately describes, in order to see what some of the truly distinctive qualities of Christian faith are, as opposed to faith in general. And what we're going to argue is that the faith that Jesus is looking for is a faith that might best be described as child-like. Christian faith is a child-like faith.

The first thing I would suggest is that it is **courageous**. Imagine the sheer courage it required of this woman, in a Near Eastern culture of the time, to muster up the nerve to go and approach a strange foreigner, a Jew, no less, who were known above all things for their disdain of outsiders. Imagine having to walk through dark streets of the town alone in a culture where women were not allowed out after dark, even in groups. Imagine walking unannounced through the doorway, and seeing a bunch of big rough-looking men gathered around another man who looked just as rough as they were. Imagine ignoring their stares and mutterings as she walked towards the stranger in their midst and boldly addressed him, knowing that most Jews considered people of her kind as no better than dogs.

Imagine that courage. It would be like a stripling boy with no weapons other than a slingshot, stepping forward to challenge the greatest warrior of the age.

That's the kind of courage Christ is looking for. It's the courage the author of Hebrews is talking about when he writes:

Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, what we may obtain mercy, and find help in time of need.

Christian faith does not approach God timidly, any more than a child approaches her father timidly when asking for a kindness. Completely secure in her father's love, a little girl approaches completely without fear.

But at the same time, notice how both this woman and the deaf man approach Jesus honestly. There is no attempt to disguise the desperation of their situation, and no attempt to pretend that they still have some degree of control over it, or some chance of success on their own. They come to Jesus in the full realization and acknowledgment that He is their only recourse, their only hope, and they cast their entire burden on Him.

And isn't that a lesson for all of us? The faith Jesus is looking for is one unadulterated with pride or self-congratulation. How often when we pray do we find ourselves pointing out to God how strong the case is in our favor, how we've always done the right thing, or always been such a kind and generous person, or how deeply unfair it is that this or that is happening to us, of all people!

But God doesn't want our argument, God wants us, He wants our trust. He wants our faith to be based on who God is, and not on who we are. He wants our honesty, not our argument. We come to God as who we are, that's all God asks, that's all God wants. He wants us to be as honest as children.

And when we look at the miraculous healing of the deaf man, something else really stands out in Mark's account. What we notice - don't we? - is how, Jesus, more so than in almost any other miracle, behaves in a way that's almost theatrical. He takes the man aside, puts His fingers in the man's ears, spits and puts the sputum on the man's tongue, looks dramatically up towards heaven and says "Be opened" in Aramaic, even though the man was deaf and couldn't even hear him. There's almost a comic element to the whole scene.

And to me, that whole scene speaks to the man's innocence. He is clearly not a sophisticate, he's clearly someone who needs a cure clothed in the ways with which he is familiar and comfortable, and that's what Jesus gives him.

What that teaches, I think, is that the faith Jesus wants is not the logical, critical, evaluative attitude of an adult, but the unquestioning acceptance of a child. What God will ask of us, after all, or the way that God responds to our prayer, will often not make any sense at all in terms we can understand. God may ask us to follow

Him where we have no inclination to go, as He asked Abraham to travel into an unknown land. God's response to our prayers may be in forms we can never have expected, with a timing that makes no human sense at all.

God is looking for a trust that will remain true, even when all our adult faculties are scandalized, a trust as innocent as the trust of a child.

And consider another thing that stands out in the case of the gentile woman. One of the great things about the account is how the woman picks up on a very subtle element of Jesus' initial response. When he first rejects her request, we have to imagine Him doing so with a nonthreatening smile on His lips, because when He says that you shouldn't throw the children's food to the dogs, he doesn't use the ordinary Greek word for 'dogs', the word Jews normally used in referring to non-Jews. Instead he uses a special Greek word that refers to little household puppies. And in doing that, he is clearly inviting her to continue the dialogue, rather than simply dismissing her request. She picks up on that and the episode continues to unfold.

And what we learn from that is that Christian faith is a listening attitude, as much as it is a speaking attitude, a receiving as much as an offering. Faith is not so much an attitude of obedience as it is of cooperation, but it can only be cooperative when both sides are engaged in listening to the other.

We remember how Elijah, alone on the mountain, strains to hear the voice of God in the thunder and the earthquake and the fire, but finally hears it only in a light breeze. The fact is that God speaks in a soft voice, and it requires concentration and attention to hear what God has to say. They say that children in the womb can hear their mother sing. That's the listening Jesus desires of us.

And finally, what stands out in the case of the woman is her determination. She will not let the dark of night stop her, she will not let the opinion of her neighbors stop her, she will not be blocked by the men surrounding Jesus, she will not even be discouraged by His initial rejection. She is persistent, she is patient, in a word, she's determined.

And that's the final ingredient of the attitude of Christian faith that Jesus is seeking. Prayers are not always answered in the way we expect, or seem not to be answered at all. New difficulties are always popping up in our lives. Sometimes it seems like there is just no end to troubles.

I once spent an entire afternoon swatting flies on the small open porch of my grandparents' little farmhouse out in Nowhere, North Dakota. There was no end to them, but I was determined. I would not quit until they were all dead, every single fly in North Dakota if necessary. I would not leave that little porch until they were all gone. And I swatted and swatted until the cows literally came home and I could barely hold the fly-swatter above my head.

I only wish I had brought the same determination to the other things I've done in my life, the determination that I had when I was a child.

So there we have it, the five ingredients of the faith Jesus is looking for in each one of us, so that he might say of us, as he did of the Gentile woman, "I've never seen faith like this even in Israel!" Courageous faith, honest faith, faith that is innocent, that listens, and that is determined to the end, even until the cows come home.

And here's an easy way to remember all that. Courageous – C. Honest – H. Innocent – I. Listening – L. Determined – D. What does it spell?

What Jesus is looking for is Child-like faith.

And that kind of faith is what we all more or less lack, and so that's what we pray for this morning, Father. We pray for courage to defy all odds, honesty not to hide our weakness, innocence to let ourselves be guided, for ears to listen, and for a determined heart. We pray for these things because they are what Jesus is looking for, and so we know that You will provide them, when we ask for them, as we do this morning, in Jesus' name.