

Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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We're back!

...Well, yall are back. I'm here up in front with yall preaching for the first time, but you're back! You're back from summer vacations, from visiting family and friends. You're back to school, back to the routine that Fall brings. I'm back in Chicago from my seminary internship to being a full-time student at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. We're back, here at church, all together again.

And this is the gospel passage we have to welcome us back.

The story of a heated dispute between Jesus and a woman from the margins, of some light name calling, followed closely by the story of Jesus healing a man who was deaf at the request of the man's friends. It's a busy, perhaps confusing, perhaps concerning story.

What a welcome!

As I thought about how this passage might be related to our "Welcome Back Sunday", and as I moved through this past week, going back to classes, and through one particular task of obtaining health insurance, I began to wonder if this passage wasn't the perfect passage to welcome us back together as God's people.

I've been scooting around the city in a quest for Medicaid, and I'll spare you all the details of this journey, but this week, it led me to my neighborhood human services office. I pulled up, I walked into a room *filled* with people. It was apparent that many people were at their wits end, myself included. I walked up to a woman who looked exhausted and told her I had a question about my application status. She gave me some insight on what to do next, but as I left, I passed by a woman crying on her phone outside. "Why?! Why did you send me all the way down here to wait 3 hours only to be told that no one could help me?! Who is this office here to help?!"

And this, friends, this snapshot of the human services office I think teaches us about this story we encounter here today. This woman who I passed, she was asking the question that I think echoes the Syrophenician woman, and it echoes the blind man's friends... it is the question that is central to the gospel today: Who is this for? Who is Jesus for?

Jesus is tired. He's been helping people, and healing people. Much like anyone who works in the human services field, he knows something about compassion exhaustion. Anyone who works or volunteers in a field where your job is to help and serve knows that while it is truly gratifying work, it takes a toll on you. And so Jesus takes a break. He's gone out of his "assigned region" into Gentile territory for some much needed rest and recharge. But what he finds is that the word has already gotten out ahead of him, people know he's there, they've heard what he's capable of doing, and they find him. Specifically, we hear about this woman, a Syrophenician who seeks out Jesus because her daughter is possessed and she trusts that this Jesus is something different and can do something about it.

Jesus though responds with something that catches me, at least, as being something that's a bit un-Jesus like. He and this woman go back and forth in a heated exchange. Jesus knows he came to serve God's chosen people of Israel, but what about these other folks he encounters? Well, Jesus' first response is to name aloud the system they're operating within—these are outsiders who society has deemed less important, likening them to the dogs. And while it shocks me still to read this passage and encounter Jesus in nasty name-calling, it also does something in me to hear Jesus acknowledge the system they're operating in, he names it aloud. In Lutheran theology, we believe there is power in calling evil out for what it is, and perhaps this is what Jesus is doing. He's naming the brokenness that has looked over this woman and her daughter, it's the same system that led to Jesus' death.

But this woman comes back with a testimony to who Jesus' ministry is for, reminding Jesus that even dogs get fed scraps from the table. With that, Jesus sends the woman on her way, assuring her that her daughter is no longer possessed by a demon. Jesus, along with all of us, is reminded that his ministry spreads and spans the borders of even Galilee.... His ministry is to testify to God's love that spans through and

encompasses even the most unsuspecting places, that the world overlooks, or even actively works against.

I think what drove this woman to Jesus is what drove the man who was deaf's friends to Jesus, and that is a bold trust that Jesus would not only heal their sickness in that given moment, but that God's power through Jesus was capable of overturning the systems that kept these folks from being fully accepted members of society in the first place. It was a defiant desperation that drew people to Jesus.

What the Syrophenician woman testifies to, though, is as much a reminder for Jesus as it is for all of us. That is, that Christ came to break down the barriers that separate Jew and Gentile, male and female, able and disabled... whatever barriers we wish to put up, that prioritize or preference one over against the other. The barriers that keep folks waiting in line for hours at the Medicaid office... Those are the barriers Christ came to overturn. God's love knows no bounds. In Christ, through this passage, we come to know something more about God's hospitality that spans the borders and boundaries Jesus encountered, and that we encounter today.

Soon, we will gather around this table. The crumbs from this table are more than enough to fuel us with grace to go out in the world to testify to the hospitality, the welcome of God's love, we have received. My prayer is that we always have witnesses, like the Syrophenician woman, who challenge us and remind us of the scope of God's welcome, who remind us that this table is a table for all.

That's the part of this gospel passage I love the most. Jesus tells people to keep it down, not to tell anyone about what he's done, but people can't help but testify to what they have seen. The message of God's love cannot be contained. They've felt it in their bones, and it is radiating out into the world.

So, welcome back!

Are we ready to testify to this welcome together?