

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Adults, children, dogs. It was the assumed hierarchy in today's gospel reading. Adults, children, dogs. At best, it was Jesus's metaphor to get the unnamed Syrophenician woman to go away. Adults, children, dogs. At its worst, it was a racial slur as "dogs" was a commonplace derogatory term applied to a Gentile outsider.

Modern societies have developed similarly damaging racial/ethnic hierarchies. We might think of the well-known caste system in India. In the United States, we might recall the enslavement of Africans and the "Three-Fifths Clause" as another example of damaging hierarchies. Even though most of these hierarchies have technically been removed from the law, many barriers remain. The advantages to those formerly at the bottom remain out of reach, the benefits are hard to access, and the stigma still lives on. Another human-made hierarchy is derived when our culture labels something as normative. It labels what is considered default as supreme and then what is different as less than. For example, straight individuals and their experience are preferred over gay, lesbian, queer, intersex, and transgender experiences. We notice it with assumed heteronormative ideals when bathrooms are on a gender-binary or when a male-presenting individual is asked about his wife.

These are the types of distinctions that are mentioned in today's reading from James. In that reading, the author called to mind the ways that we are partial to

those who have resources, riches, and connections. Oftentimes, we treat them with greater respect and kindness than those without. Like when we treat those who are well-kempt with respect and those who look homeless with a critical eye. Yet, today's reading reminds us that God shows no partiality.

In today's gospel, some scholars say that Jesus needed that reminder himself. After all, Jesus was in a primarily Gentile area when he met that unnamed woman. She was someone who was outside the Jewish realm. She pushed him to widen the welcome to include her daughter. Then, after healing her daughter, he took a circuitous route to another Gentile region called the Decapolis. There, a deaf man was brought to him. Now, statistically speaking, the man was probably another gentile and this time, there was no debate; rather, Jesus healed him. It's almost as if his interaction with the unnamed woman would help Jesus learn to more fully embody God's truth that there is no partiality. For, in the rest of Mark's gospel, we'll find that Jesus's ministry is about action. It's about rejecting violence and pride. It's about serving and showing love. It's about being with people instead of observing people.

You see, we have a God that acts and invites us to be active in our faith. James said it in a harsher manner. He said, "¹⁵If a sibling is naked and lacks daily food, ¹⁶and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? ¹⁷So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." That's intense! James is saying that God's vision is for an active faith. A faith that follows in the footsteps of an active God who liberated the Israelites, who saved Noah and the animals from the flood, and who shows no

partiality. James is basically saying that your thoughts and your prayers are not enough. Rather, God's vision for the world is filled with active love. So, let's think about it in today's context. James is saying that **only thinking** about Afghanistan refugees is not the way God reigns; rather, God's reign is **ALSO** to respond to their needs with resources and our work with organizations like Refugee One. So too, **only praying** for those impacted by hurricane Ida is not God's vision; rather, God's vision **ALSO** involves working to restore destroyed lives through our financial gifts to organizations like Lutheran Disaster Response.

The takeaway from the reading from James is that our God acts. **Only** offering thoughts and prayers are not what God imagines, envisions, or suggests. God invites us to join in God's work to bring about a world where the outsiders become our kin. Where the hierarchies of them and us are broken down. Our God imagines a world where we recognize our deep interconnection.

So, it's fitting that today's readings land on the day when we begin the Season of Creation. If you haven't been with us before during the Season of Creation, it's a time of year where we acknowledge our interconnection with all of creation. We acknowledge that diverse ecosystems are God's gift and are in a delicate balance. Those acknowledgements go hand-in-glove with the Syrophenian woman who reminded us that the hierarchical systems of the world are not God's systems. For, humans are not superior to other animals, plants, fungi, bacteria, and algae. Rather, we are all interconnected. The Season of Creation invites us to acknowledge this interconnection and to realize the ways we have let our ego pretend that humans are superior and justify our consumption without regard.

During this season, you'll notice that we've pitched a tent in our worship space. This tent is a reminder that God has pitched a tent among us in Jesus. It's a symbol of our call to practice creation care as an act of radical hospitality, as an act of safeguarding a place for all creates, and as an act of acknowledging our common home. It's a reminder that God has given enough for our need but not for our greed.

For today, we are reminded by James and the Syrophoenician woman, that we have a God who doesn't only ponder, hope, wish, and pray, but that our God acts. Our God acts to include and welcome all. Our God acts to bring about abundant life for us and for all creation. And, our God invites us to be partners in this action. To find ways to gently care for the earth. To limit our travel so that others might live. To slow our consumption so that others might eat. To live more simply so that others may simply live.

Friends, our God took on human form, our God pitched a tent among us, and our God gave us the example. We are invited to live in ways that follow Christ's footsteps. To welcome all people, to break down barriers and borders, and to acknowledge that abundant life is found in the diversity of life that God has created. Amen.