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St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church
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Text: Mark 7:24-37

Words. Words have the power to build up or tear down. Words have the power to comfort or unleash hurt. We are people who have no problem saying what we mean and meaning what we say sometimes without thinking about the consequences or the backlash. Words can get great things done for the good of many while at other times words denigrate those who are seen as different. Many a post on social media have left friends, families, entire communities, in solidarity or at odds with one another. Words have power.

In the Gospels Jesus always seemed to say the right things. If he happened to teach or say something that individuals or crowds or even his disciples didn't understand, he would further explain without hesitation. In Mark's gospel he never seemed to avoid interactions or conversations and he always seemed to do the inviting. In chapter 1, he invites his first disciples, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." When later in the same chapter a leper approached Jesus for healing saying, "If you choose Jesus, you can heal me." And Jesus said, "I do choose. Be made clean." In chapter 3 when he saw a man with withered hand, Jesus said to him, "Come forward." And he healed him. Later in chapter 5, when Jairus begged Jesus to come to his house and heal his daughter, Jesus went with him almost immediately. He, as they say, never messed up.

Then we get to this morning's pericope. And this is definitely not the Jesus we've come to know.

Mark tells us that after doing so much for individuals and the crowds, Jesus needed to get away for a while. So he set out to the region of Tyre for a little rest and relaxation and hopes that he can do so unnoticed. But that was not to be the case as a woman, a Syrophenician woman, in fact, comes and bows down before him. According to the custom of the day this Gentile and unaccompanied woman had absolutely no business speaking to a Jewish man and rabbi but she was desperate. She collapses at Jesus' feet, begging and pleading with him to drive a demon out of her daughter.

We expect a kind and gentle Jesus to say, “Mother I have heard your story and I will save your daughter. Go home and find her well.” Instead, he responds to her saying, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Yes, in case you missed it the first time, Jesus called the woman a dog. She and her kind are dogs. Dogs! Not a kind thing to call anyone. His reply was not the least bit pastoral or even hopeful for this woman who came to him seeking healing for her child. He was rude!

Some commentators try to explain that Jesus’ reply was simply a refusal. And not only was he refusing her but anyone who was like her. That his gift of healing was only for a certain people, the children of Israel, and then maybe, maybe, if there was anything left over, he would dole out his blessing. Other commentators are saying that Jesus called her a “puppy” but I don’t know about that... Still, Jesus has committed the very social faux pas that James warned against in our second lesson about making distinctions! There is no room for partiality, James wrote, for we are called to that higher standard where love, mercy, and compassion have no boundaries.

Words. Words have the power to accept the worth of a human being or keep a person in his or her “place”.

This is a situation that we see all too often today, of making distinctions-the haves and have-nots. Those who are worthy and those who are not. This is *my* neighborhood and *you* do not belong. *You* are one of us so *you* get the bank loan, the better schooling, the better job, and a chance-maybe even a second chance. And *you*-good luck with all that. Get lost!

Still, there is much to admire about the woman’s tenacity and she does not back down. Words have power. And with power the woman stands up to Jesus and she turns his words around. “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” In other words, in her unworthiness-She. Was. Worthy. Worthy even if it were only crumbs! Her words spoken boldly were heard and her daughter was healed. Not only were the woman’s words heard but they opened up Jesus’ understanding of who he was and what his mission was to be. His mission was not meant for just his Jewish brothers and sisters. At the heart of it He is to care for the loved and unloved, insider and outsider, the righteous and the sinner, and everyone else in between. Everybody!

As uncomfortable as this story may be for some, and it certainly was for me, there is a message that bears repeating. For stories like this happen each and every day to somebody. At some time in our lives we may have been that woman, that man, that child bullied, ignored, talked down to, and made to feel less than. Have you heard or read recent stories of the girl who is threatening to quit school altogether because she is afraid of being beat up? Or the eleven year old boy who took his own life after coming out as gay? Or the black teenager who was handcuffed and placed in the back of a police car because someone thought he was kidnapping/robbing his white grandmother and her friend? There are still children separated from their families and enough other children who have harmed themselves or have taken their own lives. There are enough teens and young adults who have not yet realized their own self-worth. There are enough men and women who have been pushed aside, criticized, ostracized, judged, gossiped about, cheated on, and denied the basic rights due every human being because of race, color, looks, age, religion, and size. The list goes on. The stories are endless. And I've got a few stories myself. And these things happen everywhere, in every facet of life including the Church.

What holds us back from treating each other with respect, from the same opportunities? What holds us back from showing others the love of God? Selfishness? Privilege? Fear? What?

Our words have power. Our words have the power to build up or tear down. Our words have the power to comfort or unleash hurt.

A powerful dialogue happened in the region of Tyre that day. From the lips of an unnamed Gentile woman came words that opened up the heart and mind of the One sent by God into the world. A Savior not for a piece of the world but for the entire world. The Savior who taught us all the way of love. The way of compassion. The way of acceptance. His is the way we must strive to follow.

May we use our words and power to fill the gaps that divide us one from the other for the betterment of our world. We are way past due getting off this slippery slope, this course of divisiveness, competitiveness, jealousy, ignorance, and hate. Because when it is all said and done, when it is all said and done-God is the maker of us all. And this we share in common-God's same abundant and boundless love! Amen!