

“Can You Hear Me Now?”

Worship Resources

Pentecost 16, Year B

9th September, 2018

James 2:1-10,14-17 NRSV / Mark 7:24-37 NRSV

Can you hear me now? Good!

I'm sure many of us remember those Verizon Wireless commercials
from a few years ago.

Commercials meant to impress on us the reliability of that company's network,
suggesting that we could count on always having a good connection
that would enable us to hear clearly, and not lose our calls.

In our lives today, having a good signal and connection becomes more and more important.

We have come to rely on our connectedness much more,
often not having any other alternatives for communication
other than our hand-held devices.

How do we feel when that connection is lost,
when we find ourselves in those odd spots
where there is no signal or wifi to connect us?

It can be a little harrowing can't it?

Now for the younger folks among us,
not being able to connect to social media
can actually cause great anxiety.

There have been occasions I've witnessed this
with my goddaughter Kylie. It's not pretty.

There's twitching and irritability, a sense of being lost without focus.

But that's a whole 'nother sermon in itself.

My point is, our connectedness through those networks

has become very important today

as that is primarily how we communicate with each other

and keep plugged in with our community.

When we get disconnected, we can feel lost and alone,

and there is a sense of helplessness.

Our lesson from Mark this morning has two stories of people

who find themselves in that same situation,

feeling disconnected and separated from their connection to the world.

Though there's more than one level of separation at work in these stories.

In both stories we have people who by definition are on the outside of Jewish culture.

They are both Gentiles, which automatically makes them unclean.

In addition, the Syrophenician woman is just that, a woman,

which means she shouldn't even be addressing a rabbi directly,

only through her male relatives.

The deaf man has a physical defect,

which in that culture implies he is suffering because of his sin,

and is someone who is also unclean and should be avoided.

These are both people who have lost their connection,

who are not heard by the Jewish crowd around Jesus.

But they aren't the only ones in this story on the outside,

who have a bad connection to the larger community.

Jesus is traveling in Gentile country.

He has stopped at a local home for the evening, and being a rabbi,
it undoubtedly would be a Jewish household.

However, this was located in the rural area outside of the city of Tyre.

His hosts would most likely have been farmers or craftsmen
who provided goods and services to the Gentile city
where the woman in the first story lived.

As foreigners from the lower classes,
they too would be disconnected from the Gentile society
in which they lived.

They would probably have been exploited and taken advantage of
in much the same way the Jewish elite in Israel
took advantage of the poor in that country.

We often read this passage and think that Jesus is being very harsh

in his response to the woman in the first story,

but if we look at the bigger picture,

it's not quite so over the top as it initially seems.

From the perspective of her position over his hosts

and fellow Jewish immigrants in the area,

Jesus can be seen as making a valid point

that as someone who profits at the expense of others,

she can expect difficulty being seated

at the table in the kin-dom of heaven.

Yet can that fully explain the brutal illustration he uses?

He compares her and her daughter to common dogs,

scavengers who aren't worthy to even be fed the same food

as the chosen, the children of Israel.

For a moment, it might be helpful to consider that Jesus himself is a little disconnected.

We often get so focused on the divinity of Jesus,

that we forget that he was also fully human.

Is it so far-fetched to consider that he was tired after a long day,

and here comes this local woman of privilege

asking for healing into the house of the very people her kind oppresses.

How would we react in that same situation?

He takes a teaching moment and goes a little over the top.

And that's where the teacher gets schooled.

She turns it around and responds

that "even the dogs get the crumbs that fall from the children's table."

She reminds him of the words of Isaiah that he is to be a "light to the Gentiles"

as well as restoring his own people.

Unlike the similar story in Matthew, in Mark it is not her faith, but her words,

that earn her and her daughter redemption.

She reminds him of his calling and mission,

and opens his ears and mouth.

He is reconnected to the Gospel and mission that he momentarily lost sight of.

There is a tension in Jesus that we often overlook.

Being both human and divine,

there must have been a struggle between human foibles

and what he knew to be the will of God.

We get a precious few glimpses of this struggle,

such as his doubt in Gethsemene

and his moment of desperation on the cross.

It's not hard to understand his dilemma in our story today.

Jesus would have been schooled in the Torah

as any Jewish male would be.

He would have received training in the current dogma

and it's application in Jewish religious law.

There were very clear lines between who was in, and who was out.

There was no doubt that there was an us, and a them.

And we avoid them as much as possible,

so they don't corrupt and defile us.

From that perspective, his knee jerk reaction to the Syrophenician woman

in our story is perfectly understandable.

But he regrouped and got back to his God frame of mind,

away from the human interpretation of scriptures

that weren't originally meant to permanently exclude and isolate.

Keeping to our cell phone analogy, he got back into an area of service.

He was connected again.

His struggle in our lesson today is something we can identify with as well.

It's pretty easy for us to lose our service, and find ourselves "disconnected."

Like Jesus, our culture and our religious backgrounds

can cause us to inherently apply dogma that excludes,

that creates an "us versus them" system of looking at those around us.

We too, can find ways of applying scripture,

meant as guides for our personal ethics, to exclude and judge others.

It's easy to find excuses wrapped in isolated scriptures

to set ourselves apart from those who are different than us,
to draw lines between ourselves and others.

There's a story of a town drunk who gave his heart to Jesus Christ.

He immediately stopped drinking and began to look for a church
and had purposed in his heart that he would attend the first church he found.

Determined to turn his life around he found a church and went in.

He was met at the door by a couple of ushers and they told the man,
"Please go home and clean up, take a bath, cut your hair, shave your beard
and then you can come back to church."

The man left and did what they asked
and came back to the same church the next week.

Once again, he was met at the door by the ushers.

The former drunk said, "I have done what you asked, I am clean,
my hair cut and combed,
I am clean shaven and I am ready to come to church."

The ushers said to the man, "That is good but your clothes are dirty and torn up.
Go get a suit so that you will look nice for church."

A little sad, the man decided to do what they asked,
after all this was the church he felt he was supposed to attend.

So he went out and bought a nice suit, determined that this time
they would let him in so he could worship God.

The next Sunday the former drunk returned to that same church
but this time the man was met by the two ushers and the senior pastor.

Together, the three of them explained to the man
that he could not come into the church because of his past.

How would it look if the town drunk came to their church?

The man walked out of the church totally dejected

because he desired to worship God in a house of worship

with the men and women of God.

He sat down on the steps in front of the church

and put his head in his hands and began to cry.

As he sat there, he felt the hand of someone touch his shoulder.

Before he could look up he heard a voice say,

"Don't worry my friend, I have been trying to get into that church for years

and they won't let me in either."

The former drunk looked up and saw a man dressed in a white robe

with nail pierced hands. Jesus wanted in that church too.

We too can lose sight of the Gospel we are meant to embody,

that grace is available to all and is to be extended to all.

We can get so wrapped up in "us" that we forget

that we have a commission to share the Gospel with all,

not just those who are like "us."

Two big problems can arise when we fall into the "us versus them" way of thinking.

First, it can be all too easy to blame "them" for all of our problems.

We create scapegoats to avoid taking responsibility

for our own part in our circumstances.

And scapegoats usually end up being sacrificed in some fashion don't they.

Christ's own story bears that out.

Second, we can get so wrapped up in us that "we" become our sole focus.

We worry about our building, our attendance,

and our own personal worship experience
and we forget about our commission
to make disciples of all people and nations.

Just a hint, they're not in here.

If we're not that shining light of which Isaiah speaks, they won't see us.

James tells us that faith without works is dead.

There's a tale of an old Scotsman who operated a little rowboat
for transporting passengers.

One day a passenger noticed that the good old man
had carved on one oar the word "Faith" and on the other oar the word "Works."

Curiosity led him to ask the meaning of these oars.

The old man, being a well-balanced Christian
and glad for the opportunity to testify said, "I will show you."

Then he dropped one oar and plied the other called Works,
and they just went around in circles.

Then he dropped that oar and began to ply the oar called Faith,
and the little boat just went around in circles again -
this time the other way around, but still in a circle.

After this demonstration the old man picked up Faith and Works,
and plying both oars together, sped swiftly over the water,
explaining to his inquiring passenger.

"You see, that is the way it is in the Christian life. Dead works without faith are useless,
and faith without works is dead also, getting you nowhere.

But faith and works pulling together make for safety, progress, and blessing."

Are we rowing in circles? Are we connected? Do we have service?

Or do we need Jesus to clear our ears and straighten out our tongues

so we can hear him now and we can speak the truth that there is no them, only we.

How can we be a place where all who enter are “us”

regardless of who they are or what their background is?

This week I hope you will spend time in prayer seeking to think about ways

that we can be the disciples we are called to be,

connected with full bars and reliable service.

What ways can we demonstrate our faith in our community?

Can they hear us now? May it be so. Amen.