

“Doing Faith”

Sept. 9, 2018

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

A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold. The rich and the poor have this in common: the LORD is the maker of them all.

Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity, and the rod of anger will fail. Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor.

Do not rob the poor because they are poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate; for the LORD pleads their cause and despoils of life those who despoil them.

(James 2:1-10)

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you? You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.

(James 2:14-17)

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and 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? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

(Mark 7:24-37)

From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go--the demon has left your daughter." So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone. Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."

So, it's September 9 and for a good number of people in the room it means that it's a long awaited day. No not their birthday or anniversaries. Not a holiday. It's the day professional football really get's going after 7 months since the Super Bowl. Around Duuval county there's been a lot of excitement because the Jaguars are supposed to be a pretty good and maybe a very good team this year. In most of the preseason rankings many have the Jaguars, and we say this reverently and with great humility, might even have a chance to go to the Super Bowl. The other day I worked on this sermon and went home a noticed that the NFL network was doing a look at the upcoming season. As an introduction they had a 3 or 3 ½ minute video flash back of some action from last season. In the entire video there was not a single, not one, Jaguar. A team that was 10-6 last year and that went to its conference championship game. Not one. I kid you not, I thought to myself, there we are, doing our best to come to the table, and they treat us just like the Syrophoenician woman. I guess that means, just like she did, we have to make our case on the field.

In Mark today we find that wonderful character. She must have been important to Mark because she is actually aloud to speak. Only one other woman in the whole gospel has something to say. She is important though and just may be the epitome of what we are called to be and do. She's a mother with a sick child, a child in need, a child she treasures loves and adores, a child for whom she will do whatever is necessary to gain healing. She has heard of Jesus, a man she

knows she has no right to approach because, in Jesus times as in our own, we humans manage to create social barriers and stigma, because of the differences in us, rather than remove barriers and do away with stigma because as wisdom says, "the lord is maker of us all."

This single-minded mother approached Jesus with all the resolve of one who was determined to get what her child needed and nothing was going to get in her way.

Reportedly she bows down at Jesus feet and begs Jesus to heal her daughter. Jesus, in a voice our ears are unaccustomed to hearing, says, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Most scholarship believes that Jesus said this as an illustration for those who could hear of their own prejudice against this gentile woman. Which makes the exchange that follows all the more powerful.

The woman, already bowing, perhaps peering at the dogs which were no doubt present, says to Jesus, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Jesus, moved by her determination says to her, "For saying that, you may go--the demon has left your daughter." So she went home, found her child lying on the bed, alive and well.

This mother shows us not how we might be, but how we must be. Jesus Christ has something all of God's children need, our church needs. He is the only source of the grace we all need to live, to learn to grow into the people God wants

us to be. The question for us is how determined are we that these, our children of God receive, that which they so desperately need?

We as a church have become intensely involved in the vocation, in the calling, of doing exactly what this mother is doing. Seeking the best for her child, by seeking the best for all of God's children, or at least as many as we can reach. We are people, accepting over and over the challenge and the calling to broadening our baptismal embrace to children and youth in our own congregation, our community, our nation and the world. It goes without saying that we intend to care for, to nurture, to encourage, to offer God to the children in our midst and also to do our best to be open and welcoming to still other children, here at Highlands. But we also join the fight for other children. Poor children. Dispossessed children. Children at risk. Children who need a helping hand in education. Hungry children. Homeless Children. Children who need to know that they are loved. That someone, somewhere, with maternal ferocity is advocating for them. We learn from the Syrophenician woman not what we might do, but what we must do.

Mark very carefully follows up this story with one that has Jesus and the entourage traveling into a region called the Decapolis, an area of ten greek speaking cities. Here, a man is brought to him who is deaf. In deep contrast to the first healing Jesus takes the man aside and Mark reports that he puts his fingers in his ears and says in his native language, Aramaic, like a secret code, "ephatha"

which means 'be opened.' Immediately the man is able to speak plainly. Jesus, already overwhelmed by the needs presented to him daily, charges them to tell no one. It isn't yet time for all to know. But Mark tells us "the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."

Of course around here when miraculous things happen, and they do, we ask you to do just the opposite. We want you to tell our story. We want somebody to know that there each week over a hundred children, poor children, catch a backpack full of pretty nice crumbs from our table. Children, who are fed this weekend, who had a bowl of cereal to eat this morning, and can open a can of beefaroni for lunch because of the dogged maternal zeal of the good people of this church. Every day we feed some older folk. We deliver "welcome to the world" gifts to newborns. We make sure the pantry of every home in need in Arlington has a jar of jelly on the shelf not to mention green beans. We put clothes on the backs and rice and beans in the stomachs of children in Haiti. We fling wide the doors of the church and give Christ welcome and a table at which to eat wonderful meal to the homeless poor... and so much more.

Our calling is to, by our living, by our example, by our teaching, by our proclamation, by our sharing and showing of the faith to zealously proclaim that which we have come to know. Jesus Christ is Lord of all. Jesus Christ is the

source of faith, grace and healing. Jesus Christ calls us to heal and make whole. Jesus Christ charges us to love God first and then one another.

Finally, as a church which takes its Baptismal vows seriously, with our programs of nurture beginning once again, it is our our calling, to be just as doggedly determined to provide what we and our children need, crumbs from a table so richly endowed with grace as to be able to build faith. We are called today, to make it our responsibility to see that all of God's children receive that which they need, not because they are physically ill and at the point of death, but because we live in a time of spiritual denial and decay that is so very contagious. We cannot take the chance with the spiritual health of our children, and our children's children, we must do all that we can to provide for them and to fight for their needs. Their need for faith and grace and truth.

Grace gives us salvation. Faith engages us in relationship to God in Christ. What we do, is faith, and our works, make the gospel come alive within us.