

Sermon: *On the Outside Looking In*
Text: *Mark 7:24 – 30*
Date: *September 7, 2009 AM*
Place: *Jesup First UMC*

I told you not long ago about my childhood pony, Silver Bell and how she was so wild that my daddy had to tie a tire around her neck to slow her down. Well, Silver Bell had a personality problem. She was just plain mean sometimes. And one day we were riding her at my grandma and grandpa's farm and she just refused to move. So, in my little 8 year old mind, I thought: "*Hey, if I use a switch, I can get her going.*" So, I reached over and broke off a couple of switches and handed one to my sister and one to my cousin and they started hitting that horse like a jockey in the Kentucky Derby. Silver Bell took off running and the girls just kept hitting.

Now, sitting on the front porch that day, watching all of this happen, was our parents. And they jumped up from their chairs and started running to help us. In fact, Aunt JoAnn was the best of them all. She jumped up and hit the door and jumped from the porch to the ground, missing all three steps and she was screaming at the top of her lungs: "*Gabriel Dean Lewis, you get off that horse and stay off that horse.*"

It was the funniest thing. Well, it wasn't funny that day. That day I got a whipping, but looking back on that day, we have laughed at Aunt JoAnn many, many times. But you know, I learned a lesson that day ... No, it didn't have anything to do with switches or horses; it had to do with mothers and their children. You just don't mess with mama's baby; mama will do anything, whatever it takes to protect and provide for her baby.

Well, in our text this morning, we encounter a desperate mama. When things started heating up between Jesus and the Pharisees, He and His disciples withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon for some rest and relaxation. And while they were there, a woman came and fell at Jesus' feet and begged Him to heal her daughter who was possessed by an unclean spirit. But Jesus said: "Let the children eat first, for it isn't right to take the children's food and feed it to the dogs." But the woman insisted: "But even the dogs get to eat crumbs from under the children's table." And Jesus said: "Because you have said this, your daughter is healed." And she went home and found her daughter completely healed.

Now, this story has several great lessons to teach us this morning. So, let's take a closer look as we prepare our hearts to commune with God in the sacrament.

First, in Christ, spiritual cleanliness has nothing to do with race. You might remember last week's message about the washing of hands and how being clean or unclean has nothing to do with what goes into a person, but with what comes out of a person's heart. Well, there's a similar message here in this text. You see, the Jews believed they were clean and everyone else was unclean. They separated themselves from the Gentiles. They refused to intermarry with them; they refused to socialize with them. And if a priest had any kind of contact with a Gentile, he was considered unclean and had to go through the purification rituals before he could go back and serve in the Temple or in the Synagogue. Faithful Jews

considered themselves to be human and Gentiles to be less than human, dogs, unclean, uncivilized, and unwanted.

But in Jesus, an amazing transformation takes place. Matthew says at first Jesus ignored the woman. Then, Matthew and Mark tell us that Jesus called her by a racial slur, “*a dog.*” But in the end, He heard her cries; He saw her persistence; and He healed her daughter. In the end, Jesus – a religious Jew – interacted with a Syro-Phoenician woman, a Gentile, and in the process shows her great love and compassion.

In Jesus, religious cleanliness isn’t based on race. Jesus told His disciples: “*Go into all the world and make disciples of all nations.*” He said: “*Wait in Jerusalem until you have received power from on high and then, you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the world.*” And it all started when Jesus and the disciples were on vacation in the region of Tyre and Sidon. There, their eyes were opened and the boundaries of their ministry were stretched to include a Gentile woman, an outsider.

Friends, there are still people – even in our community – who feel like they’re on the outside looking in. They watch our religious activities – our worship services and our fellowship gatherings – and they think to themselves: “I’d never be accepted at that church. I’m just not the right color.” Or “I’m just not rich enough.” Or “I’m just not good enough.” And part of the reason is that the church hasn’t fully appropriated the message of Jesus. We still let things that shouldn’t divide us at all

keep us from opening our arms and embracing everyone.

Spiritual cleanliness has nothing to do with race or any other external issue.

Second, we are accepted by God on the basis of our faith. In verse 29, Jesus tells this woman: ***“Because you have said this, you may go; the demon has left your daughter.”*** Now, in Matthew’s version of this story, Jesus says: ***“Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done as you have asked.”*** It was her persistent faith that moved Jesus to action.

Back during the summer, I had a major problem on my hands: the girls had flat tires on their bikes. So, they asked me to fix the bikes. Now, folks, there’s not a mechanically inclined bone in my body. So, I didn’t get in a big hurry. And they just kept asking. At first, it was a few times a week; then, it was every other day; then, it was every day. And I said: *“Yea, I’ll fix your tires,”* but I still didn’t get in a hurry about it. And finally, we all went to Walmart and they went to the back and came back with four new tires. And I thought, *“Man, they’re serious about this thing.”* And guess what? ... I fixed their tires.

You see, she knew she was a woman. She knew that Jewish men, especially religious men like Jesus, didn’t give much attention to women, but where else could she go? She was desperate. Her daughter was sick and nobody else could help her, but she believed Jesus could. And her faith overcame the obstacle of gender.

And she knew she was a Gentile. She knew that Jews considered Gentiles unclean and less than

human. She knew that in their eyes she was a “dog,” but she needed help. Her baby had an unclean spirit and she believed Jesus was the answer. And her faith overcame the obstacle of race.

And so, Jesus said: *“Hey, she might be a woman and she might be a Gentile, but she is a woman of faith.”* Paul told the church at Rome: **“I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Jesus for it is the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Gentile.”**

And friends, that’s the only basis upon which we are accepted by God – not on the basis of race or gender, but – on the basis of faith.

I don’t know what you might be going through this morning. You may have been having a tough time lately. Maybe you’ve been struggling financially like so many in our community are. And you’ve prayed about it and it seems you’re getting nowhere. Or maybe it’s your health. You may be struggling with some sickness in your life or among your family or friends. And you’ve prayed about it and it seems you’re just not getting an answer. Or maybe there’s a problem in your relationships, a broken friendship or stress in the family. And you’ve prayed about it and it seems to only get worse. Brothers and sisters, I’ve come to share this message from the story of the Syro-Phoenician woman: Trust God! In spite of the obstacles, in spite of what seems to be the indifference of God, keep praying and keep trusting for indeed, it is our faith that moves the heart of God.