

**Brothers and Sisters, Grace to you and peace, from God our Father
and from our Lord and Saviors Jesus Christ... Amen**

There's a lot in our gospel reading, and we could go in a lot of different directions.

We have the casting out of a demon... We have the healing of a deaf man... And we also have what is known as the messianic secret... In the gospel of Mark Jesus frequently tells the disciples not to tell anyone what they see, and of course, as the text says, "the more he ordered them (not to tell anyone), the more zealously they proclaimed it."

What I'd like to do this morning is connect this gospel reading with last Sunday's-- because it's a bit of a jolt. Last Sunday, Jesus was telling the pharisees and the scribes about how their religious superiority made them judgmental, and then almost immediately, Jesus encounters the gentile woman, and says, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

Ouch, and Oh my goodness! Jesus does exactly what he accused the Pharisees and scribes of doing! Talk about an uffda! Jesus is judging her, her family, her community, her whole culture as not being good enough to receive God's blessings. Jesus literally calls her a dog, and frankly, it's shocking for us to imagine Jesus ever saying anything like that! And especially, since he just admonished the others for doing the same thing! And imagine how the poor woman felt...

And when she should be absolutely offended, she responds to Jesus by saying "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

She responds with humility, grace and persistence. Jesus acknowledges her faith, and the daughter is healed. The demon is gone... I think last week's story and today's story are connected. I think the writer of Mark is intentional about this turn of events, he wants us to be as surprised as Jesus, exactly so that we can see this miracle of faith.

When we compare these two stories, we see that the Pharisees' are the blind leaders of the blind, while the gentile woman is the one with the genuine faith... truly remarkable... Faith is always surprising isn't it? You would expect the religious leaders to be the ones with the amazing faith, but it turns out to be the woman, the outsider, the one everyone else thought was outside of God's blessing. It always seems that Jesus has a way of flipping things upside-down!

And I have to wonder about the demon that was tormenting the daughter. Demons destroy, damage and diminish human life. And they come in all sorts of shapes and sizes. Addictions are demons, too much of anything that can take over our lives: alcohol, gambling, opioids, even things like our electronic devices, I sometimes wonder about that for myself...

Do you suppose the demon tormenting the daughter could be related to poor self-esteem; perhaps a demon of shame? Of course, we don't know and I'm just speculating, but when you live in a context of being on the outside and looking in, sometimes you internalize those messages you hear from others—and you come to believe you're no good.

For instance, can you imagine how the woman felt when she was called a dog? Can you imagine how the daughter might feel, perhaps being the object of similar insults?

We want to believe that sticks and stones can break my bones but names will never hurt me. Unfortunately, that little rhyme is absolutely wrong. Like slow and steady erosion, hurtful names injure people tremendously.

We callously contribute to the demons of others when we laugh at their ideas; when we mock them; when we call people names like stupid or ugly...

And if you think this isn't real, just remember the suicide deaths of children because of cyber bullying. We are saints, and we are also sinners. And it is exactly what comes out of our mouth that defiles us.

And this name calling and slander is also a double-edged sword. It not only hurts the victim, it also hurts the perpetrator. Without being aware of what is happening, we ourselves become bound and enslaved to our judgments. We actually become what we resent and dislike in others.

The evil that we profess to be in others, becomes the evil incarnated in ourselves. When we bear false witness against our neighbors, we imprison them, and at the same time we also imprison ourselves.

We are entering a new political season. Shortly we will be seeing all kinds of television ads doing exactly all this name calling, mocking, scandalizing, belittling, all the stuff of negative campaigning.

Candidates returning evil for evil, and it's a spiral exercise in verbal violence... And both sides engage in it like they are possessed with demons. Each accusing the other of being evil, and right back again. And most of us wonder if they have any idea what this all looks like...

This year, pay attention to how you feel when you see the various political ads. Do you get tied up in knots? Do you fear the world is coming to an end? This is real stuff. Demons destroy, damage and diminish... We all know the insidious contours of this name calling demon. Whenever we start pointing our fingers at others, we begin a spiral of damage and destruction.

Jesus tells the gentile woman that she is essentially a dog, and she responds with the most gracious comment imaginable, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." The fortitude of this woman! She does not return evil for evil... She is persistent, courageous, and full of hope... Faith is a mixture of all these things as well as many other things.

I'm reminded of a line I read a few years ago.... "Being a Christian is not about increasing our faith, instead it is about using the faith that God gives us." Christian faith is about professing a God who fills us with hope, and living expectantly into that world for which we hope; a Kingdom of love, forgiveness, reconciliation, healing, inclusion and belonging.

Like the faith of that gentile woman, faith moves us to action; it compels us. Frequently we may not even be aware of what faith is doing in our lives, but in hindsight, when we glance over our shoulder, we are often amazed and surprised at what our faith has done. Imagine our two churches Cannon River and Cross of Christ, when Dr Norelius was planting us in this soil, do you think he imagined we would still be thriving? Faithful through generations...

I see faith in every little kindness, forgiveness, graciousness. I see faith in every act of generosity and compassion. We experience faith here at Cannon River and Cross of Christ, like it's in the air we breathe. Whenever I see people sharing coffee and working together, I see faith in action.

Faith organizes community picnics, Sunday schools... Faith picks up the phone and calls people to let them know we care... Faith comes together every Sunday morning to worship and hear God's word...

Where does this stuff of faith come from? Quite simply—Faith comes from God. It comes when we least expect it, and it surprises us. Faith itself is a miracle, it comes out of nothing and it changes everything! And this is not hocus pocus, this is incarnational. This is real, physical, authentic and genuine truth.

After the encounter with the gentile woman, Jesus is again on the move and encounters a deaf man... I confess, I can sometimes be a little deaf when it comes to helping people, especially when I don't understand their circumstances.

Quick story - When I was little, my mom tells me they brought me to the Doctor for a hearing test. She said I was always asking people to repeat themselves. They thought there was something wrong with my ears. So, I took the test with the head sets. Afterward, the Doctor talked with my parents and said everything was fine.

He explained to them that sometimes people will ask that something be repeated not because they didn't hear it, but because they didn't understand it. And even still today, when I don't understand something I'll say "What?"

Hearing and understanding are closely related and context makes a difference; when our circumstances change, sometimes we hear things differently.

In a sense that's what we do in church. Luther called the church a mouth house, it's where we hear the word of God. Sometimes we can hear the same story over and over again and it doesn't mean very much, but once in a while, we'll come to church and hear a story and suddenly we might understand it in a completely different way and it changes things.

Maybe I can hear the story of the gentile woman, hear the story of her faith, and maybe I can understand a little differently how God orchestrates faith in different people differently. Maybe I can be surprised by her amazing faith, and this amazing God who sends demons on the run.

The good news today is that whatever the demons are pulling apart, God can put back together. Through this surprising faith there is healing and reconciliation. There is new creation and hope. This Christian faith is for everybody, for the Jews and Gentiles, for Lutherans and Catholics, for Republicans and Democrats, Swedes and even Dutch people like me... Through Christ we are all Brothers and Sisters...

When the world out there is being torn apart by the demons of today, we are different. In this surprising body of Christ, we are all held together in God's love and for the sake of the world.

The Kingdom is all about including, reconciling, healing and belonging; and that maybe the most surprising miracle of all. And that's a story we need to hear, and hear, and hear again... And it's Rally Sunday, let's not forget to tell the story!

Amen.