

**September 5, 2021**

There is a lot packed into our gospel reading today; we have essentially two healing stories. The story of the Syrophenician woman, who Jesus shockingly calls a Dog! And because of her remarkable response, Jesus casts out a demon from her daughter... And then we have the story of the deaf man from the region of the Decapolis.

Both of these stories involve gentiles. A gentile, by definition, is an outsider. And in the context of the Jewish people, that means they are outside of God's favor. As far as the Jewish people were concerned the gentiles were not God's chosen people.

So, we have the insider and the outsider dynamic... To some extent, we still know what that's about. It's an identity. An entire way of thinking about ourselves that sets us up and over against other people.

Remember growing up and Lutherans and Catholics? Things are changing of course, but we Lutherans used to think Catholics were outsiders... And of course, vice versa...

And of course, as far as the Democrats are concerned, the Republicans are outside of God's favor... And as far as the Republicans are concerned, the Democrats are outside of God's favor... And I suppose Vikings and Packers, too!

Whenever there are groups of people and insiders and outsiders, there is rivalry and suspicion and fear and judgment, and often leading to hurt and other forms of violence...

Quick story... When I was in Junior High, I was called in to the counselor's office along with six other friends. We all nervously sat around a table wondering why we were there. Thinking we had all done something wrong!

Well, the counselor began to tell us about another kid, I'll call him Dave who was having a hard time in school. He had recently moved into our community and he was picked on by others. Dave was smart, but he had some peculiar habits. So, he was easy to make fun of. And a lot of the kids did. People were terribly cruel to him.

The counselor brought us together because Dave said that of all the kids in school, we were his closest friends. Which was pretty much news to us, because we hardly knew him.

The counselor wanted us to simply invite Dave to sit with us at lunch. A simple request... Dave pretty much sat by himself... The counselor pleaded with us to be kind to him.

Well, as it happened, the next day came and we invited Dave to sit with us, and he was amazed, initially suspicious, but otherwise happy to do so. When he sat down, one in our group actually got up and left, and I'll always remember that person because I remember feeling ashamed of his behavior...

As it turned out, one day became a second day, which became part of a routine. Dave did become a regular at our table and amazingly, while he was still a little peculiar, we got to know him, and as it turned out, he became a genuine friend of ours. He was smarter than the Dickins and always willing to help with homework.

Well, that was a long time ago, believe me... And I noticed just recently that one of Dave's parents passed away. It was noted in my class of '77 Facebook group. And so many of my class-mates commented on it and sent condolences to now, Doctor Dave...

For someone who was initially on the outside of things, Dave was brought in. I won't say that the junior high lunch group saved his life, but I will say that belonging is healing every way we experience it.

The Syrophenician woman dared to claim that she belonged, "even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs..." Jesus is amazed by her faith, and the daughter is healed... The line between the insiders and the outsiders began to erode.

Then we have the story of the man from the Decapolis, another Gentile, now this man was deaf... And remember, hearing is often related to understanding...

Sometimes people will ask that something be repeated not because they didn't hear it, but because they didn't understand. When we hear these two stories, one right after the other, first the belonging of the Syrophenician woman, and then the man who was **deaf**, it has the effect of saying, "can you hear, and do you understand?"

Well, the man who was deaf, certainly heard and understood! The healing that Jesus brings is not tribal, it's for all people! And so I ask you, "Do you hear and do you understand?"

The answer is "Yes, we do hear and understand!"

Because frankly, this is our story! Like that Syrophenician woman, God has given us this faith and we insist that we belong, and so we do... As Swedes and Lutherans, as Dutch and Reformed, as Italian and Catholic, we are all a part of this belonging... All a part of this healing...

We are proof, that in this body of Christ, we are all different from one another, and yet we all belong to one another...

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 much, but once in a while, we'll hear a story and suddenly understand it in a completely different way and it changes things.

When I hear the story of Jesus and the Syrophenician woman, I hear the surprise of how God orchestrates faith in different people differently.

The good news today is that through this surprising faith there is belonging and healing and reconciliation. There is new creation and hope. Through Christ we are, indeed, all brothers and sisters...

Amen.