

# “From the Table”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – February 16, 2020*

Rev. John Wahl

Psalm 51:1-7

Mark 7:1-8, 24-30

The word “evangelism” scares people; it inspires images of zealots knocking on doors or doomsday preachers standing on street corners. When Christians are told they should that they are supposed to be evangelists, it gives us knots in our stomachs. We don’t want to intrude on the lives – or the beliefs – of others. We might not want to be associated with the way we see Evangelicals behave; and we certainly don’t want to be viewed as hypocrites.

Of course, this is not what “evangelism” originally meant. Evangelism means “witness” – specifically, a sharing of the good news of God’s love revealed in Jesus Christ. Therefore, an evangelist is someone who bears witness to the gospel of mercy, hope, peace and love. This can be done in countless different ways: through how we act and serve, who we welcome and love. Many of us prefer to define evangelism according to the words attributed to St. Francis of Assisi: *Share the gospel at all times and, if necessary, use words.*

Today, as we look at the second of the seven marks of Vital Congregations, we define our witness – our evangelism – as being authentic and intentional. Thus, it is true to who we are; not separate from our beliefs. And it is purposeful: we know both what we are trying to do, as well as what we are not intending. If our witness to God’s love is authentic and intentional, it means that we cannot allow ourselves to be hypocrites; doing something other than or beyond what we believe is God’s will for us. Sometimes, actions do speak louder than words, but no matter what we say or do, everything is to be done for the glory of God.

This morning, we return to Mark’s gospel to look at two stories that will help us to reflect on what is God’s will – revealed to us through Jesus Christ – and therefore how we bear witness. These are not typical gospel stories: there are no wise parables taught or multitudes fed. Instead, we find Jesus engage in contentious interactions with those around him; first with the scribes and Pharisees, the lay religious leaders of his own faith; and next with a Gentile, a Syrophenician woman who is seeking healing for her daughter. And maybe the message we are to hear today is that, as witnesses of God’s love, no matter who we might encounter, we are given an opportunity not just to teach, but also to learn.

Many of us have been taught to view the scribes and Pharisees of the New Testament as self-righteous hypocrites and to distance ourselves from them. Passages like this morning's first tend to reinforce that perception. But it's a popular misconception that these Jewish adherents were seeking to earn salvation through their obedience to the Law. In fact, they understood that God's choosing and calling of Israel was a gift. They also understood that God gave them the Law as a gift, to order their lives as God's people. Their observance to the Law was intended to be a witness to the nations around them, to give glory to God.

The Pharisees took this calling to be a holy nation very seriously. Their interpretation of the Law led them to believe that just as Temple priests were required to wash their hands before entering a holy place or offering a sacrifice, all Jews should wash their hands before meals as a way of making mealtime sacred; and bringing every aspect of life under God's law.

Jesus calls the scribes and the Pharisees "hypocrites" because while they honor God with their lips, their hearts were not in it; because they "abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition." This was not an issue of hygiene, but of tradition. According to Jesus, the problem with the scribes and Pharisees was that they had become so focused on the externals of faithfulness that they were putting up walls of alienation instead of drawing closer to God and their neighbors. The rituals they observed created a spiritual hierarchy between the "clean" and the "unclean." Instead of expressing the holiness of God, ritual handwashing and other purity practices became a means of excluding people from the table – or from worship or other aspects of life – that they considered dirty.<sup>1</sup>

We have been taught to distance ourselves from the scribes and Pharisees, yet perhaps we have more in common with them than we imagined. We understand, like them, that being called by God is a gift. In response to God's grace, we want to live in the ways God would want us to live. The problem is that there is always a temptation to judge those who do not live in the same way, to set ourselves apart or even above others.

Sadly, Christians sometimes allow this attitude to color the ways that they bear witness; they evangelize people who do not believe or believe differently in order to change them so that they will more faithfully adhere to the Law. Here's the problem, though: laws don't interpret themselves. They never have. The scribes and Pharisees question why Jesus' disciples do not follow the tradition of the elders. We have our own traditions; and it's fair for us to wonder if sometimes we worship those traditions

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<sup>1</sup> Elisabeth Johnson from *WorkingPreacher.com*

instead of worshipping God; or at the expense of being able to welcome, accept, and care for others. Rituals and traditions will not save us; they do not make us clean; that can only come from within.<sup>2</sup>

Skipping several verses ahead, we find Jesus again traveling into Gentile territory, this time in the region of Tyre. Jesus wants to be alone, away from the crowds, but they again find him. Among them is a woman, the Syrophenician, whose daughter has an unclean spirit; the mother comes and bows down at Jesus' feet, begging him to cast out the evil spirit. What takes place next – the testy conversation between Jesus and this woman – is a matter of much debate. Why would Jesus call this desperate woman and her daughter dogs – not cute little, puppies, but a pejorative indicating they are inferior to Jews like Jesus? Was Jesus just tired and cranky? Or was he instead testing the woman to discover the depth of her faith?

Both possible explanations for Jesus' seemingly harsh words fall flat. His claim that the bread on the table is for the children, and not for the dogs, seems antithetical to the proclamation elsewhere in the New Testament that in the Kingdom to come, all people are God's children: male and female, slave and free, Jew and Gentile. Could it be, then, that the woman's rebuttal – that even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs – is a teaching moment for Jesus; that in this encounter with the Syrophenician woman, he learns something new – or at least a fuller, more robust understanding – about his own mission? Can we infer from this encounter that by our own interactions with others, especially with people different from us, we can come to better understand how to bear witness to God's mercy and love? Strangers, newcomers, people who are different from us stretch our perspective and have much to teach us; if we are willing to listen.

Because of what she said to him, Jesus tells the woman that she can go; and when she returns home, she discovers that the evil spirit has left her child. We have no way of knowing how or whether this woman believed that she was worthy of Jesus' time and attention, but she definitely believed that her daughter was. So convinced was she that it was not in God's will for her daughter to suffer from this unclean spirit that she was willing even to argue with this famous teacher and healer; a man who called her a dog. Her care and advocacy for another created the opportunity for Jesus' vision of mission to grow.<sup>3</sup>

For those of us who are used to having a place at the table, perhaps it is good to be reminded that none of us has any right or privilege with God. All of us come as

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<sup>2</sup> Reggie Weaver, "Cleanliness or Godliness" from *Day1.org*

<sup>3</sup> David Lose, "What the Woman Teaches Us"

beggars to the table, and it is solely by God's grace that we are fed. We bear witness to the good news as a thankful response to the blessings we have received from God; not in order to earn it or secure our spot at the table. All that we do (and, if necessary, say) is, at heart, not in order to produce a pre-determined outcome: such as getting someone to follow my interpretation of the Law, or to practice rituals in the way I do, or to join a church like mine. No, we give because of the way we have received; we love because God first loved us.

If evangelism is to be intentional, it must be based on what we believe God values most. That list might include justice for the oppressed, caring relationships with the vulnerable, and responsible stewardship of creation. It would mean paying attention to those we know and love, but also opening our ears and eyes to strangers and those in the shadows. Intentional evangelism calls us to put our time, attention, prayers, and resources toward the proclamation of peace and hope for the world; even when what we sometimes see most is division or despair. At the table we are fed; and from the table to the world we are sent.

And if evangelism is to be authentic it cannot be judged based its on results. Bearing witness to the good news of God's love may alleviate human suffering, it might create caring relationships, it may inspire others to grow and act in faith; but even if it does not – or does not always – it cannot negate the power of the message. We are claimed and called by God; and we believe that God is at work ahead of us, even in those places that we have trouble imagining. The table of God to which we come is larger than we can fathom; surely, not everyone will have the same traditions and rituals as we do. All we can do is witness in the way we believe God is leading us: to welcome others to come as they are and to accept them in the same way that God has accepted us; freely and without reservation. Amen.