

The holy Gospel according to St. Mark the 7th chapter....

Good morning Church and welcome to worship on this the 15th Sunday after Pentecost. I'm Pastor Justin Eller, and I serve as your Assistant to the Bishop for Latinx Ministry Initiatives and also as one of the pastors at Amazing Grace Lutheran Church in Lawrenceville, Georgia, and I bring you greetings today from Bishop Kevin Strickland and your Southeastern Synod Staff.

Friends, maybe you've heard or yourself have used the maxim, "Desperate times call for desperate measures." This quote is generally thought to have developed from the ancient Greek physician Hippocrates, when he wrote about extreme diseases and extreme cures. But lately, this phrase has been lurking around my heart as the world watches and experiences desperate times and desperate measures.

I think about the desperate measures mothers go through to save their children.

Consider Afghanistan. We've witnessed lately, women and mothers in Afghanistan trying with all of their might to flee the known brutality of the Taliban or help their children escape an uncertain future.

Consider El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. Some mothers love their children so much and are so determined to protect their children's well being that they send them on the perilous trek north on their own or as part of a larger group, these are desperate times.

Consider mothers of indigenous descent and mothers of African descent who faced destructive genocides, displacement, and the terrors of chattel slavery.

Consider mothers struggling under crushing poverty, intimate partner violence, or who have a sick child and can't afford their care.

Desperate times call for desperate measures.

Now consider, and the Syrophonecian mother in our reading from Mark today. Her seeking out of Jesus, who tries to escape public notice for a minute, is just the first sign of her persistence, her desperate measure on behalf of her sick daughter.

As this story is read aloud again, and we verbalize Jesus' first words to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs" and I find myself calling out, "no Lord, don't do that. Don't speak to her like that, that's not what you teach," but he did...he called her a dog! Our Lord Jesus called this mother facing desperate times a dog, hesitant to help her.

With a quick wit and a resilient heart, she flips the metaphor back on him, she bites back with, "Yes Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." // In Jesus' metaphor, the children are Israel. She is considered a dog...which would have been equivalent to a racial slur. The crumbs are the food, the blessings, the healings. //

According to the Women's Bible Commentary, "even though the foreign woman's setting and posture were conventional, the request itself--coming from a woman-- in those days, was shameful, drawing both Jesus' refusal and his disdain."

Professor David Lose reminds us that *every time this painful scripture comes up, we may wish for a more comfortable interpretation that says Jesus isn't really being mean to her, he's just testing her by creating a barrier to see what she'll say and then when she passes the test, she's*

rewarded with the healing of her daughter. // I don't buy that reading of Jesus.//

Scholar Elizabeth Struthers Malbon writes, “*The fact that Jesus’ initial response to the woman is rude bothers faithful readers who want Jesus to be a perfect model of morality and courtesy, untouched by his patriarchal cultural and human nature....In Mark’s version of the gospel, she’s the first woman who’s bothered by Jesus’ narrow view of God’s power coming through him, and then Jesus is bothered by the expansive truth of her observation. She’s also the only one in this gospel to beat Jesus at an argument.*” // She has heard what he can do, she makes a bold move out of desperation, and she won't accept patriarchy or privilege or refusal for an answer to her sick daughter.

When we lay this healing story beside the healing story of Jairus’ daughter (from chapter 5), we can see how he initially approached them differently, with partiality.

The two parents are quite different, this mother is Greek, a woman, and comes to Jesus on her own perhaps as a widow or unwed mother...in that day, those were three intersections of discrimination. Jairus, on the other hand, was Jewish, the leader of the synagogue, and a male of high status.

Both have sick daughters, both interrupt Jesus and fall before him and beg for healing. But Jesus responds quite differently. He willingly goes quickly with Jairus to his sick child, but to this foreign woman, Jesus refuses her plea with unkind words.

A true, albeit sanitized, reading might highlight that their stories show a Jesus who listens to the pleas of both mothers and father and who heals both Jews and Gentiles. Yes, true...but what else is there? //

Friends, we're surrounded by this gospel story every day. Whether it's ongoing violence against communities of color OR anti-immigrant sentiment influencing decisions OR the lack of desire to care for neighbors by not wearing a mask and not getting vaccinated, this gospel story of "desperate times call for desperate measures" plays like a broken record every day.

So how might you respond when someone facing desperate times interrupts you? Might you send them away dismissively or might you listen to them, have a change of heart, hear the cries of the forsaken as the voice of God? If you are the one facing desperate times, how might you respond to being refused or ignored? //

God understands desperate times and desperate measures too. Consider the first part of John 3:16, for God so loved the world...that he gave his only Son... the cross and death are symbols of the desperate times of the cruel oppression under ruling Empires.// Death and resurrection are symbols of the desperate measures God was willing to go through to save us, to free us from the grips of sin and bring us to eternal life so that we can share this good news with everyone. //

The light in this text shines through the Syrophonecian mother's sense of the fuller, broader implications and impact of Jesus' ministry of healing. She knows that he's a healer...she knows that he's a freedom fighter...she knows that he can do something...that he heals what is broken // -- broken bodies, broken spirits, and broken relationships, // including broken relationships between Jews and Gentiles, insiders and outsiders, between us who are divided on so many levels today. //

Jesus knows what it is to be in a broken community, consider the disciples, / and he knows what it is to be broken in body as he endured the cross, and he knows the power of healing and resurrection that restores life. //

Dr. Struthers Malbon reminds us that the mother achieves her goal of healing her daughter --and more-- because of her “saying something”, not because of her faith by itself, but because of her speaking up and speaking out -- because of her action.

Because of her action, Jesus’ heart grows bigger. He realizes again how big his ministry and God's mercy are and he responds with a maturity that changes something within himself and empowers inclusivity...indeed the kingdom of God is wider and more compassionate than we might think it is or want it to be. //

As it is plain to see, God’s love and mercy show no partiality, and even Jesus needed to learn that too.