

# “The Bread of Life is Fed to Dogs”

Mark 7:24-37

Last week, I mentioned how Mark emphasizes the shift that Jesus makes in His ministry – moving away from the Jews and turning His attention to the Gentiles. Jesus has been debating with the Pharisees concerning their traditions. Not against the idea of traditions, but He speaks against putting traditions over and above the Word of God.

As we have been reading along with Mark and hearing about Jewish hand-washing rituals and dietary laws and such, we have also been reading along with corresponding words from Isaiah: “These people honor Me with their lips, but their hearts are from Me. . . In vain do they worship Me teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.”

When you follow through in Isaiah, you can see the response God gives to the complaint He has against Old Testament Israel. When He is ready to put His Divine plan into action, God tells the people that there will be signs that He has put His plan into action and the Messiah has come – signs such as He will make the “ears of the deaf unstopped” and “the mute tongue sing for joy” and turn Lebanon, which is that land of the Philistines into a fruitful field – that is what we heard from Isaiah a couple of weeks ago. Part of that land of the Philistines, in Jesus day, is called Syro-Phoenicia.

So the first thing we hear about after Jesus debate with the Pharisees is that He goes and casts out a demon in a girl from a Syro-Phoenician, who was Syro-Phoenician by birth, we are told – of the descendants of the Philistines in Lebanon. And then He turns around and heals a deaf/mute guy. This is the fulfillment of prophecy right before the eyes of the disciples.

And we read the account of the Syro-Phoenician woman, and it seems very uncomfortable. Jesus says, “it is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” And as much as we want to explain away Jesus’ words, He said what He said. But it has Old Testament precedent. She is Syro-Phoenician, from the land of the Philistines. The unbelievers, those outside the kingdom of Israel, they are referred to as dogs throughout the Old Testament.

This imagery is used by Jesus in the Gospels and even at the end of Revelation, those outside of the New Jerusalem are called dogs. Dogs in Jesus day were viewed very differently than we view them today. Most dogs were not pets. Dogs were wild. They lived outside of the city and fed on the garbage that was thrown outside the city wall. They were an unclean, outcast animal.

But even more, this woman is from the land of the Philistines. Who is the most famous Philistine? Goliath, of course. When David went out to confront Goliath, what did Goliath say? He says to David, “Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?” David could have rightly answered, “Yes, you are a dog.”

But He was not a dog because he was simply a Gentile. After all, Uriah the Hittite was among the most faithful of all the men in Israel. Goliath was a dog because he was an uncircumcised unbeliever. He was

outside of the gates of the kingdom of God. It is not right to take the treasure of God's grace meant for God's children and throw it to the dogs. It is not right to give to the unbelievers the benefits of the treasure of the Bread of Life (forgiveness, salvation) when they do not have Christ who is the Bread of Life.

What the woman shows in her response is that she is not an unbeliever. She values the Word of Jesus, unlike all of those folk back in Jerusalem who think that faith in God is all about eating the right kinds of food and washing your hands in a certain way. In Matthew's Gospel, this exchange between Jesus and the woman is more detailed. What Mark emphasizes, starting in chapter 7 which we have read over the past three weeks, what he emphasizes is that the Son of God has entered into this world for the sake of the whole world, even Philistine dogs who eat pork and bacon and probably don't wash their hands.

Christ died for them. Do not ever look at anyone as if they are without hope. Christ is the hope of the world and Christ died for them, just as much as He died for you and me.

So, from there, Jesus and the disciples go to the region of the Decapolis – the region of the 10 cities. The most well-known of the 10 cities is Damascus. Crowds of people start following Him. Immediately after our text today is the feeding of the 4000, while still in Gentile country. He eats with them just like He did the 5000 in Israel.

In the first half of Mark's Gospel, you get Jesus performing miracle after miracle and showing the people of Israel that He is God. He is the One spoken of through Moses and the prophets and the Psalms. And the people of Israel think that they will be righteous before God simply by who they are and what they do. They are not looking for grace.

So Jesus turns to those who know they have no right to claim righteousness; they have no right to stand before the Lord. And they beg Jesus to show mercy and grace and the power of God. Jesus heals the man who was deaf and mute. Jesus performs miracle upon miracle, just like He did in Israel.

And just like He did before, He often uses creative means to bestow His grace. He could have just spoken and the man would be healed. Instead, He put His fingers into his ears and then spit on His own fingers and touched the man's tongue (EWWW!!).

Why would He do this and not simply speak a word of healing? God is very consistent in how He deals with His people and distributes His grace. Quite often, the distribution of God's grace comes by Him utilizing something in the physical world to be the vehicle for that grace. Baptism and Holy Communion are prime examples of this. You see this all over the Old Testament – Naaman is told to wash 7 times in the Jordan River to get rid of leprosy. The ash of a heifer, a cow, would be mixed with water for cleansing rituals under the law of Moses. Moses was told to make a bronze snake on a pole and when the people looked at it they would be healed. We could go on and on.

The point being – God uses means. He comes to the “dogs” of this world, to those who are outcast and outside, those who know they have no right to stand in righteousness, and in specific, miraculous ways He feeds us with more than just crumbs from the children's table – He feeds us with the Bread of Life. Amen.