

Proper 18, Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B – September 8, 2024

“Extraordinary Hope in Ordinary Times”

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ST. PAUL'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

VERGENNES, VERMONT

Isaiah 35:4-7a | Psalm 146 | James 2:1-10, 14-17 | Mark 7:24-37

In the life of the church, we're about halfway through the longest stretch of Ordinary Time, between Pentecost and Advent, but the Gospel readings are really extraordinary. It's just one miracle after another, and tension is growing as Jesus tries to keep the news from spreading to the authorities who will one day conspire to kill him.

At the end of July, in John's gospel, we read that Jesus took five barley loaves and fed thousands, then he retreated. “When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.” The disciples got in a boat and headed for Capernaum, and Jesus met them by walking on water to the boat. That's extraordinary.

In August, we found out that Jesus and the disciples didn't manage to escape the crowd. They followed them across the sea and so Jesus gave them another lesson about who he was. They thought he was king. They didn't understand that he wasn't an earthly king, but something entirely new. He tried to explain it to them in words they might understand, telling them he won't feed them ordinary bread, but something better, the bread of life. This teaching became more complicated, even a little disturbing. Jewish listeners in the synagogue could not make sense of his teaching that anyone who eats Jesus' flesh will live forever, that they would drink his blood, and that he would be “raised up on the last day.” These are extraordinary images.

If they had said, “Jesus, we have no earthly idea what you're talking about,” he could have replied: “Exactly. I'm not talking about this world. The flesh means nothing. The spirit is everything. I'm talking about spiritual food. This is a whole new world, a new fantastic point of view (sorry, when you live in Florida, you get programmed by Disney).” Jesus was talking about the spiritual world. What the synagogue members did say was: “This teaching

is difficult; who will accept it?” Only a few disciples like Simon Peter believed that Jesus was the Holy One of God, or as Jesus called himself, the Son of Man.

At this point, we leave John’s Gospel and shift to Mark’s. Jesus had exorcised a legion of demons in a man who had been living in the tombs. Jesus told the man who wanted to follow him to go home to Gerasene and show his people that he was healed. The crowds followed Jesus across the sea, where he healed the daughter of a synagogue leader. Here, “he strictly ordered them that no one should know this...” (Mark 5:43) Jesus returned to his hometown of Nazareth and sent the disciples out to purge evil spirits and heal people. Like in John’s Gospel, Jesus fed thousands and walked on water.

Despite his best efforts, Jesus attracted the attention of the religious leaders, who enforced the law. The Pharisees and scribes were watching and waiting to see if Jesus or his followers failed to observe all of the hundreds of purity laws. When they saw his disciples eating without ritually washing their hands, the religious leaders accused them of not following Jewish tradition. Jesus accused them of putting their own traditions before God’s law, which is always only about one thing: love.

Human laws are not the same as God’s laws. Human laws are ordinary. They might show people how to behave. They might keep a person walking on the righteous path, but they don’t always capture the spirit of God’s law.

Now here we are in September. In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus and the disciples had traveled to the region of Tyre in the Roman provinces of Syria and Phoenicia. This was a completely foreign land. The people of this region worshiped many different gods, including Canaanite and Roman gods. Here, the authorities were Roman, not Jewish, and the people were Gentiles, not Jewish.

Jesus seemed to be seeking solitude. He entered a house and didn’t want anyone to know he was there, but his presence was noticed. A mother from the town came to beg him to cure her daughter of an evil spirit. He had done this many times before, but this time, he did not immediately agree. “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the

children's food and throw it to the dogs." His reaction is very confusing. The mother asked for help for her daughter, not for herself. Her daughter was a child, but did Jesus just say the daughter was a dog? What got into him?

Everything Jesus did up to this point was extraordinary and predictable. If someone begged for food, he produced it. If someone needed to be purged of demons, Jesus took care of it. A woman who was hemorrhaging was healed, simply by touching his cloak. Did he detect a lack of faith in the Syrophenician mother? How was she any different from those who came before her?

There is no scholarly consensus to help us interpret his passage. Exhausted and seeking a moment's peace, Jesus seemed to be showing his human side. He was always on duty, always under pressure, anticipating more challenges from the Jewish and Roman authorities. He could never just book an airbnb and go away for a relaxing weekend on the sea of Galilee without being mobbed by people asking him to perform miracles, like some genie. Jesus rejected the mother's request, but she persisted. In a humble, respectful way, she said, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." She likened herself to a dog, which held up a mirror to Jesus. Then, she asked humbly not for a loaf of bread, but for the crumbs under the table. She returned Jesus to himself and he granted her her wish.

Two things jump out of this story. In Mark Ch. 5, Jesus cured the synagogue leader's daughter without hesitation, but two chapters later, Jesus resisted helping the daughter from a gentile family. This is such a human thing to do. If we are going to treat someone as inferior, it will almost always be someone who is different from us. We put the children of foreigners in cages, like dogs.

The other thing that jumps out is Jesus' humanity. What would be the point of God coming to earth in human form if that human being were always like God? To be perfectly human, Jesus would have to fall short, and then allow a stranger to return him to himself. That is the Jesus we know and love—open to those different from him and compassionate.

The next story of healing, in which Jesus opens the tongue and ears of a man who could not speak or hear may be echoing this theme of opening up. The woman's humble, respectful words opened Jesus which reconnected him to God's mission to heal everyone—Jews and Gentiles. Jesus was then able to heal others more freely.

The extraordinary message in these gospels is not that Jesus could perform miracles, which made him seem super-human—a king, or even a god. The extraordinary message here is that Jesus was indeed human.

These stories should open us up and restore our faith in Jesus as well as renew our hope in humanity. If we hold up a mirror in the face of rejection and denial with humility and respect, we may invite others back into their goodness. There is hope, too, in knowing that God experienced our humanity, including times when we fall short, and still remains faithful and loving. May we hold tightly to this extraordinary hope in ordinary times.