**SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
September 9, 2018**

**Mark 7:24-37**

     One of the most challenging and yet satisfying jobs I’ve ever had was in the four years I served as the Senior Chaplain and Instructor of Religious Studies at St. Andrew’s Episcopal School in Austin right before I came out here to St. Thomas to be with you.

     Like most Episcopal schools St. Andrew’s serves a very diverse population.  Only about 20% of the student body identified as Episcopalian.  The rest were Roman Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, none of the above or none at all.  St. Andrew’s has chapel five days a week and most of the chapel services use the Morning Office or Morning Prayer from the Book of Common Prayer or the template around which the services are conducted.   The goal of chapel, which lives at the heart of the goal of all Episcopal education is not to realize “little Episcopalians”, that is to say, the goal is not to proselytize or try to make converts.  Rather, the goal is to cultivate in the students a love of virtue, a heart for serving others, faith in the power of God’s goodness of grace and the recognition that they are each of infinite value yet part of a Universe that is larger than themselves, a Universe that is filled with purpose and learning.   The  Common Prayer that is spoken and sung in chapel at St. Andrew’s draws on the ancient traditions of the church, and is at the same time, hospitable, inclusive and inviting for those of every tradition or none at all.

     One of the many indicators I had that our mission was working came one day when the  mom of one of our families who were major benefactors to the school, was honored for her service as a volunteer in almost every aspect of student life. This woman and her family were, and are, observant Jews.  In her remarks accepting the award, she went on at length about how chapel at St. Andrew’s, with its ideals of service and spiritual growth, was so important to her and her family.  She said that she was asked once by a fellow member of her Temple congregation why she and her husband sent their four children to an Episcopal school where there was chapel five days a week. “Oh, but you don’t understand,” she said to her friend, “chapel at St Andrew’s has made my children better Jews!”

     Yes!  Chapel, rooted in the heart of Jesus’ teaching to love God and love thy neighbor, and chapel rooted in the witness of Jesus’ life of sacrificial love and welcome hospitality for all had deepened her children’s appreciation of their own traditional values of reverence for God the Creator and the Divine call for justice and compassion and service in the world.  This is such a wonderful example of Jesus the Teacher reaching out beyond the borders of the boundaries of one particular tribe, The Episcopal tribe, the Christian tribe, if you see what I mean, with a healing message for the whole world.  A message beyond our borders.

     Now there’s another thing about being a teacher that I discovered and that’s how much a good teacher learns from her or his students.  My 17 and 18 year old students would routinely have insights into texts that I hadn’t considered.  And on at least two occasions a student pulled me aside to tell me that something I had said inadvertently might have been hurtful to another student in the class.  I was so grateful for their courage and their compassion for their fellow students and for giving me an opportunity to heal what might have been a broken relationship.  What great teachers my students turned out to be!

     So here we are this morning with our gospel  text offering us an example of a teachable moment.  On this day, the teacher isn’t teaching!  Jesus hurt the dear woman with whom he has this shameful encounter.   First, we want to notice that Jesus has now crossed over into Gentile country in what we would know today as Lebanon.  He’s beyond Israel’s borders and he’s been approached by a Syrophoenician woman, she’s therefore a double outsider.  Both a Sentile and a woman.  And this outsider, this a pauper, has an urgent request.  Her daughter is possessed by a demon.  Would Jesus please come quickly and heal her?

      A couple of things we should notice here.  First, Jesus has been on the road and working hard for quite a spell.

     When you read a little before this encounter in Mark’s gospel you’ll learn that Jesus has been traveling and working almost non-stop.  So the very human Jesus needs some space and some down time.  He’s bone- tired and dog-tired.  The second things to note is that this woman breaks through at least three traditional barriers in approaching Jesus.  She lives outside the land of Israel and the law of Moses which mades her implicitly impure.  She’s a woman unaccompanied by her husband or a male relative and she initiates a conversation with a strange man which was also a taboo.  And because she was possessed by a demon her daughter was also impure.

     And so Jesus let’s her have it.  I’m not here for the likes of you, he says.  “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

     Whoa.  Really?  How harsh, almost brutal.  The “children” all the children of Israel and the “dogs” are outsiders, that is, everyone else.

     Now, here’s where  I think Jesus the teacher becomes Jesus the student.  The woman won’t take “No” for an answer.  “Sir,” she says, “even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”  You can feel the shift in Jesus here.  Of course, God’s love, the love that I embody is incarnate, doesn’t have any tribal boundaries, you can almost hear him say to himself.    It confers God’s love is for everyone, the whole world.  No one is excluded or left out of the table.  Her persistent faith has been an eye-opener for Jesus and has burst through his exhaustion.  “Come here,” Jesus tells her, “the demon has left your daughter.”

     When we read the whole of Mark’s gospel, we’ll see that this story is one of the turning points in Jesus’ life.  It marks his awareness that it’s not just Israel that need God’s healthy love, it’s everyone, everywhere.  And it’s a stranger to Israel, an outsider, who brings the teaching.

     So here we are this morning, the beginning of September which means the beginning of the school year and the beginning of our program year at St. Thomas.

Our gospel reading on this day I hope presents some challenges for us.  One of these challenges is to continue to learn, just like Jesus.  To be life long learners .  You can do that here in Bible Study, Centering Prayer Groups, the Adult Forums on Sunday and, new this year, the wonderful number of new offerings we have on Wednesday night.  Check out the flyer in your worship sheet, and then come to Homecoming across in the Ebsworth Life Center.   Take a look at all the opportunities for service and connection here.  Those are all learning opportunities.

     And that leads to a second challenge.  Spiritual nourishment is important for us, for sure.  But our work can’t end there.  Like Jesus himself, we have to be called to a larger vision for who we are.  Our Vision for ourselves has to be one that seeks out, invites, embraces, and goes to , the outside, goes to the stranger, goes to even the ones we might think of as our enemies.

     That’s why I spent so much time telling you about the Episcopal school chapel.  It’s a great example of the teaching of Jesus, the love of Jesus the witness of Jesus moving outside the boundaries of the church and speaking to the world outside.  “Why do you let your Jewish children go to an Episcopal school chapel five days a week?  Because it makes them better Jews.”  So let ’s keep learning about who Jesus is and then taking that learning outside these walls and sharing it with ones who aren’t accustomed to being invited.  Let’s be as brave as the dear Syro-Phoenician woman and insist that God’s healing grace isn’t only for the ones who look and talk and act like us.  And let’s let her be our teacher too.  Let’s let her teach us that Jesus is the one we can come to in our most desperate and terror-filled times.  Jesus is the one ib when we can hope when all our hopes seem lost.  Jesus is the one in whom we can hope when all our hopes seem lost.  Jesus is the one who takes what seems like our meager crumb of need and calls it faith.  She reminds us that what at first might seem to be only scraps fit for dogs becomes a feast of grace the we bring our vulnerable and broken hearts to Jesus.

     You know what?  That’s really good news.  And there’s a world beyond our walls that’s dying to hear it.  So my prayer is that one of our learnings were will continue to be that when we share what might feel like the crumbs of our faith with the ones outside our doors; those crumbs will feed lots of hungry folks.

So welcome back.  Welcome home.  In this coming year, let’s be fed here in this place so we can go down the street and across the bridge to feed the ones outside our walls, just as Jesus has fed us.  Bring your hungry and broken and frightened hearts.  Bring your crumbs of faith, offer them all to Jesus.  Let him transform all the pain and the fear into hope.