

14th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 9.5.21

James 2:1-17

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. For the one who said, "You shall not commit adultery," also said, "You shall not murder." Now if you do not commit adultery but if you murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

Mark 7:24-37

From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded

beyond measure, saying, “He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.” (667)

Tyre was a thought-balloon of a city. An island off the coast of ancient Phoenicia, it was connected to the mainland by a causeway. This, Alexander the Great built in the 4th century before Christ. The causeway (also called a mole) made it so he could take the city by force from the Persians. It also, incidentally, made it look, when drawn on a map, like a mere thought of the mainland, like something Syria (as it’s called today) was but imagining.

I wonder if this is what attracted Jesus to the place, that it was but notional, not quite real. Everyone needs a break from reality from time to time.

We’re back in the Gospel According to Mark. Maybe you noticed. This is supposed to be Mark’s liturgical year. During this year, Year B, we’re supposed to follow the Gospel of Mark. Year A is Matthew’s, Year B is Mark’s, Year C is Luke’s, which leaves John for special occasions—Lent, Easter. But Mark’s gospel is short, so John also features in Mark’s year, which is where we’ve been lately, these last six weeks with the Gospel of John.

Now we’re back with Mark, which means we need to adjust our expectations. We need to get ready for things to *move*. We need to get ready for *Jesus* to move—which is what he’s been doing.

No wonder he wanted (apparently) to get away: “From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there.”

Tyre is the furthest away Jesus is remembered to have gone from his home region, Galilee—the furthest away, that is, until he went to Sidon, which is further still, north even of Tyre. This, you’ll notice, means it doesn’t make much sense, that Jesus returned to his home region from Tyre by way of Sidon. It’s like saying I returned home to the Berkshires from New Hampshire by way of Maine.

Uh...

The fact that he went there in the first place is strange enough, went *away* there, away *alone* there, apparently, without the crowds, without even the disciples; went away “and entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there.”

Strange.

Or maybe not so strange.

Mark’s gospel is the only one that presents Jesus as not having come into the world with something divine about his nature. Mark’s is the only one to present Jesus as having been revealed

as the Christ in his young adulthood. Matthew and Luke both give us nativity narratives, stories of Jesus as an “Infant King,” a miraculous birth following a miraculous conception and pregnancy. John does one better and confesses Christ as active since before the beginning of time. The word of God that was in the beginning with God for it was God, Jesus according to John is to be understood as the incarnation of this living and active word, the taking on of flesh of this creative force. How Jesus became *conscious* of this isn’t something John makes clear. How he became conscious of this isn’t something any of these three gospels ever make clear. But at least in the other three gospels, Jesus does have the length of his lifetime to grow into this as a concept, as an identity.

Not so in Mark. Mark’s Jesus is proclaimed to be the Christ at his baptism, which was when he was maybe thirty years old. What’s more, the voice that came from heaven to make this proclamation at his baptism is remembered not to have addressed the crowd gathered at the river, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” No, the voice from heaven according to Mark addressed Jesus himself: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” It’s as if this might have been news to Jesus. And maybe it wasn’t such good news...?

But, everyone wants to be special, right?

But do they?

It’s funny that we think of the notion of having been chosen as some great privilege, some enviable fact. That the Jews are proclaimed as the chosen people of God—this seems enviable, until you wonder, chosen for what? That Jesus is the beloved son of God: it sounds enviable, until you consider how his belovedness played out. (Crucified.)

This is the thing the prosperity gospel treats with a sleight of hand. The prosperity gospel, the sales-pitch that God wants you to be prosperous, that God’s blessing comes in the form of wealth and worldly glory—a four-bedroom house with the three-car garage in a safe suburb where everyone agrees to tasteful lawn management, and a boat. You get a boat. You hear this preached in self-understood Christian churches. But there’s hardly ever with this any consideration that, though Jesus was proclaimed the beloved son of God, he also ended up being killed on a cross. But both can’t be true. If God’s favor comes with unmistakable good fortune, then Jesus crucified can’t be understood as God’s beloved son; but if Jesus is confessed as God’s beloved son, then it can’t be the case that God’s favor comes with unmistakable good fortune. So, which is it—a crucified Lord or worldly wealth? Which are you gonna let go as foundational to your Christian faith conviction?

And do I not get a boat?

For Jesus, being the beloved of God was becoming a big job. No mere regional savior, everywhere he went he had a powerful impact and attracted clamoring, desperate, needy crowds—people who needed saving, people who needed healing, people who needed loved ones rescued from dire straits, people who couldn't even manage to see after their own hunger, so secondary was such a concern (it seems) to the more pressing urge to follow Jesus even to a deserted place at sundown just to be in his presence.

So, he wanted to get away. He'd been healing and restoring, going here and going there, from this side of the sea to the other side of the sea, among Jews, among Gentiles, feeding crowds while night fell, calming storms while waves rose and swamped the boats the disciples were relying on. And now he meant to get away. And Tyre would do just fine for that—this *thought* of a place. No one would recognize him here. No troubles would find him here.

Tyre was busy, wealthy, beautiful, *away*.

A colleague was once telling me about the disappointing decision a couple had made to leave the church he was serving. They met with him, as he was the pastor, to explain their decision. Things were getting too political in the church, they explained. Every week there was talk of something political, something troubling—which was funny to my friend because he doesn't feel himself to be a particularly political preacher. I mean, there are always those implications, but that's rarely his starting point and rarely his end.

But, see, this couple had just come back from an extended vacation, three months away in beautiful, peaceful Bosnia. Or was it Serbia? My friend couldn't remember.

I cracked up at this, which shook him out of his lament. "Bosnia's peaceful?" I asked. "Not fifteen years ago, it was devouring itself in an inter-ethnic civil war."

"Well, maybe it's better now?" my friend wondered.

"Yeah, or maybe that couple didn't speak the language, and didn't know that people's lives are complicated in Bosnia, too. That's not just here. It's everywhere."

But not on vacation. On vacation, you don't have ethnic strife. On vacation, you don't even have to go to the dentist or do your laundry. On vacation, even church seems quaint or uplifting or pacifying, not pressing upon you some moral imperatives and really hard disciplines of faithfulness and love.

I actually preached at a vacation-church once. *Once*. Set on lovely Lake George, they had me once and never again. I can only guess I made the gospel a little too present-day for their taste. I could sense as the service went on that the congregants were there for a nostalgia trip.

Because, really, a good vacation can make you want to quit your life, can and maybe should make you want to quit your life—your life, where you *do* have to go to the dentist and you *do* have to do laundry, and where church has implications beyond its being quaint, presents an urgency that puts off peace until at least there's some justice.

Who would have thought that some time away in Tyre would present Jesus with the same pressure to restore as he found among his people in his homeland?

Who would have thought that Tyre would be a place as real, and filled with people facing pressing problems, as any place in and around Galilee?

It's not clear how this woman had come to hear of Jesus. She was a Gentile, so she likely had little in the way of messianic expectation. She wasn't *looking* for the messiah, probably not anyway. She lived in distant Tyre, a busy, wealthy city attached now to a busy, wealthy empire. Her life was probably a pretty good one. Compared to the lives of those living in and around Galilee, her life was probably marked even by luxury. But she did have this one problem. She did have this one urgent, desperate need. Her little daughter had an unclean spirit and likely suffered terribly from that—the sort of thing that would make all the power and wealth in the world come to nothing. Not many parents can tolerate the suffering of their children.

For this, she “immediately heard about Jesus.”

Immediately. Mark uses this term a lot: “immediate,” “immediately.” This is to name a concept or, better to say, an occurrence that Mark seems to sense as actual and actualizing. Something is immediate when it has no mediating process. We might hear “immediate” to indicate something that happens following something else though with almost no time between the two events. We might hear it to indicate a very, very short period of time. A moment. A fraction of a moment. Mark, I believe, has something even more sudden in mind. Like Luke's faith in the Holy Spirit as the active agent in almost every occurrence, Mark's “immediate” trusts those occurrences that seem to have no cause other than an unmediated revelation—an arrival of insight, a surprising intimacy, a deep experience, the truth.

This is how that woman heard about Jesus. As if coming of this pressing need—her little daughter now sick with a demon, she immediately heard about Jesus, that he was near, and that he was someone who could *do* something about it or could have an effect for the good about it, whether from his doing something or from his very being something, something powerful, something present.

And so he did, or so he was.

...but not before one of the uglier incidents remembered in the life of Jesus.

He implied this woman was as a dog, she and her daughter both. When she asked for the healing presence of the kingdom of God that was Jesus for the sake of his people, he replied dismissively, cruelly even: ““Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

And there have been attempts to make it seem less awful than it was. Preachers like me have explained this as hyperbole typical to the rhetorical habits of the Ancient Near East. Or we’ve supposed him to be testing the woman—testing her for resilience, persistence, faith.

This, of course, would itself be problematic, manipulative, even cruel in its own way. So, some will go further to explain that Jesus knew she would pass the test, so it wasn’t all that manipulative because, you know, he could just tell about her.

Nope, still bad.

Some have imagined that this whole thing was a performance, something she was in on as well, that only we the audience was being played.

But this is to read a lot into the text—like, that Jesus and this woman had somehow arranged this whole thing.

No. What the text itself seems quietly to insist is that Jesus didn’t expect to find much of humanity beyond his own people, or at least didn’t expect to be responsible for what humanity lay beyond his own people, didn’t expect to have it pressed upon him to be responsive to them.

Because what were they to him? What problem of his were they? I mean, we all have our limits. A man who calls me from time to time for money from the pastor’s discretionary fund calls from faraway Watertown, on the other side of the state. I hadn’t known that when I first agreed to help at the beginning of the pandemic. I always tell him, let me help you find connections there. I can’t help you from here. You’re not one our people, the people for whom I’ve been entrusted with these funds. A most recent call from him had me really irritated.

No, we all have our limits.

Not, though, apparently, the Christ. No, because apparently the Christ is Christ for the world.

This world is big. Its problems are persistent and pervasive. And from these problems there really is no “away,” not for any of us, we’re learning these days. There is no “away” in a global pandemic. There is “away” when it comes to global climate change. There is no “away” even when it comes to wars in small countries like Afghanistan, or even Bosnia for that matter. Everywhere

there's entanglement. Entanglement! See, the geopolitical imagination is finally catching up with the theoretical physical imagination, mid-twentieth century physicists seeing in their calculations the true fact of reality being a sticky web of entanglement. They were, though, catching up to the theological, the Christological: Christ is Christ for the world.

There was a time when such a thing would have been unimaginable. There was a time when such a thought would literally have been unthinkable. A savior for the whole world, a manifestation of love for all people, all history, all creation: the *salvator mundi*, the *pantokrator*. A pressing past even the outermost boundary of the felt world, a pressing beyond all boundaries this urgency of love, a pressing upon us the challenge of imagination and empathy: there was a time when that would have been wildly fantastical beyond anything people would have actually lived and felt on the daily.

The time when that changed from unthinkable to unavoidable might well have been this moment of immediacy with this woman.

It might have moreover been *because* of this woman, this woman of faraway Tyre, this woman and her impassioned concern for her daughter.

She did that. She made Jesus, Christ for the world at least as far as he was concerned—because, you see, from this vacationland, Jesus returned to reality, but, crucially, he did so by way of Sidon, which was further away still than faraway Tyre, and which is therefore to imply that his return was in some actual, active recognition that home for him was the whole wide world. His sphere of concern was the whole world. His sphere of good effect was to be the whole world. He was to be responsible for this whole thing. He was, and is, to be responsive to this whole thing—

which means so are we. We who mean to follow him, we who mean to be identified by him and with him, are responsible for, and to be responsive to, one another and this whole thing.

It's a lot.

It's a lot, I know, and on a long weekend no less. Many of us might yet be on vacation, at least as far as our spirits are concerned. I can even hear you thinking it: "Let us squeeze this one more weekend in before the crush of reality really sets in. Let us wear our linen skirts. Let us wear our white bucks."

Okay.

Okay, because, of course, where we meet the limits of our own living, Christ is yet Christ for the world. Where we cannot be such a thing, which is not just on Labor Day weekend but is all the time, all the time when we ourselves can't save the world, Christ is yet Christ for the world.

So, rest assured that Jesus is powerful to save where we ourselves are terribly limited. Yet also rise and act. Do the right thing—for we are the body of Christ, and Christ is Christ for the world.

Thanks be to God.