

Sermon Preached by Pastor Jennifer Rose

September 6, 2015

“Be Opened”

Dear friends in Christ: Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord & Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

I’ve noticed something about many of the conversations I’ve been having lately: they all sound the same. At least, part of them does. I’ve been saying one particular refrain again and again: hang in there. Sitting by the bedside of patients at Lake Region Hospital: hang in there. Talking with frazzled parents trying to reestablish school-year schedules: hang in there. Texting students off at college for the first time; counseling a friend struggling with an unsatisfying job; praying with someone whose marriage is having difficult moments: hang in there, hang in there, hang in there.

Maybe it’s the time of year or maybe it’s the times we live in, but it’s a refrain that bears repeating. It bears repeating because we all need to hear an encouraging word now and then. It bears repeating because it doesn’t sound hollow, like so many wellmeaning platitudes do. Hang in there invokes the slow and steady pace of the tortoise, when so often we live in a hare-paced world and want hare-paced results. It’s a reminder that if you don’t give up, one step at a time will eventually get you to the finish line.

Hanging in there isn’t easy, of course. It requires lots of perspective, which I often say in times of crisis is the first thing to go. It requires plenty of patience, which – let’s face it – doesn’t come naturally to most of us. It requires tenacity, perseverance, creativity and strength. But more than that, it requires hope. Hope that it will get better.

Perhaps it’s that very quality that drives the woman in our gospel story today. She’s got a sick daughter. She needs help. For all we know, she’s at the end of her hope. You know what it’s like when it feels like all the doors have closed. You’re willing to consider anything: the experimental treatment; the miracle cure; the last-ditch effort. So when she gets word that this rabbi from Galilee is holed up in her neighborhood, she makes a beeline for the door. She bows at his feet and pleads for his mercy. But Jesus doesn’t say hang in there. In fact, his response is so rude, so very out of character, that it threatens to dominate the whole story: “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs,” he says dismissively. Not fair? Dogs? Couldn’t Jesus have just said, “I won’t help you?” Did he have to insult the woman and her daughter, without so much as a “sorry?” This seems unlike any other picture of Jesus that we find in the gospels. Usually he has a heart for people on the margins – women, children, outsiders. But not here. Why?

Let's look at Jesus' words for a minute. In fact, often those words become the focus of the text. Precisely because they're so unlike Jesus – in fact, unlike anything anyone with a shred of manners would say – these words make us uncomfortable, even mad. Biblical scholars have worked all sorts of textual gymnastics trying to explain Jesus' words in some way that doesn't make Jesus look like a jerk. Perhaps he's giving her a test, to see how much she really believes in him. Perhaps he's not calling her an ugly mutt, but little puppy dog. It's kind of a term of endearment. Those explanations might work in Matthew's telling of this story. But in Mark, I'm not sure we shouldn't just take them at face value. For all its crudeness, this saying may have been part of the vernacular in Jesus' day – like phrases that we wouldn't dare utter in polite company today were simply the way people talked in earlier times.

My grandma once told me a rhyme from her childhood – eenie, meanie, miney, moe, catch a tiger by its toe. Except she didn't say tiger. I was appalled. I had never in my life heard a racist thing come out of my grandma's mouth. And that is a word that I find is absolutely awful. But when my grandma was a girl on the playground, she didn't mean it as an insult. Does that make it okay? Of course not. But it reflected the attitude of the times. If we take Jesus' words at face value, then what's more remarkable in this story isn't what he said, but what she said. Instead of taking offense at the sting in Jesus' words, she turns them around. "Sir," she counters, "even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." She cannot give up the one thing she is clinging to: hope. Her daughter's life depends on her hanging in there. And so she challenges Jesus with logic, not emotion: Look, mister. I'm not asking to be treated as one of the children. I just want a few tiny morsels of your healing power. You have more than enough to go around. Why can't you share them with me? That's what we see in this woman's dogged determination: Despite Jesus' dismissal that he's here first to reach the Jews, she doesn't put limits on God's power. She comes wholeheartedly, perhaps desperately, believing that God can and will help her. Do we?

If you don't think that kind of audacious trust makes a difference, remember what happens next in the story: Jesus does the very thing he said he would not do. Her words have made a difference. Perhaps they have even changed his mind. And it's a difference that matters not only to her daughter, but to the countless number of Gentile 'dogs' that come after her. This encounter marks a turning point in Jesus' ministry in Mark. He leaves and starts working miracles among the Gentiles like never before. It's as if his understanding of his mission has been opened up. And he starts scattering crumbs of grace not just among the Jews, but everywhere. There's the good news: whether he's been serving among the Jews or is starting to reach out and include the Gentiles, Jesus shows us a God that is always open to people. His heart gets bigger and bigger all the time. He can't just sit back and ignore someone in need. He keeps opening his arms wider and wider. Those arms are open to a demon-possessed little girl, and to a deaf man with a speech impediment, and to frazzled parents and Lake Region patients and struggling couples. They're open to everyone carrying the heavy burdens that come with simply being alive.

You know, Jesus isn't the only one who is changed or opened in this story. I think the woman is too. She may have come to Jesus in a desperate attempt to find healing for her daughter. But when she leaves, she finds it for herself. We don't know what, if any, faith she has. But when Jesus says to her, "your daughter is made well," she has to decide if she trusts him enough to believe. She has to walk out the door without having seen for herself the finish line of her daughter's healing. That's the reality of hanging in there: all we can do is take one step at a time, in faith that we're not taking those steps alone or in vain. Here's the question: When our lives get hard, do we have the tenacity of this unnamed Syrophenician woman? Do we come to God, humbly pleading for mercy and boldly asking God to do what we trust God can do – share with us a few crumbs of perspective, and patience, and hope? Do we refuse to let go of God's promises because we have nowhere else to turn? As Peter confessed to Jesus in John 6: Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We need you.

Friends, whether your life is blissfully smooth or you're teetering at the breaking point, hang in there. It gets better. Help is on the way. Jesus hears your cries for mercy. And his arms are open wide for you. Thanks be to God. Amen.