

Child Like Faith—Mark 7: 24-30
(September 8, 2024-16th Sunday after Pentecost)

Welcome back! It's "Welcome Back Sunday", the unofficial beginning of the church year, where we come back from wherever summer took us and we re-launch the children's and youth ministry. We take seriously our commitment to teach children about the faith we hold dear. Often, I've been reminded to also take seriously what children can teach me. Here's a story from a colleague. A Sunday School teacher is sharing the story of Jonah and the fish, where Jonah tries to flee from God's command to go to the city of Nineveh to save the lives of people he doesn't like and is swallowed by a great fish. The teacher is explaining the story, focusing on Jonah running away from God and being swallowed by the fish as an example of things going wrong when we don't do the right thing and listen to God's voice. Later, as the teacher is cleaning up, she notices one child's colouring page, a page with a picture of Jonah inside the whale and printed on the page in coloured pencil crayon are the words, "Maybe getting swallowed by the big fish wasn't a bad thing. Maybe it was a quiet place for Jonah to think about what he was doing." Rather than seeing the fish as a calamity for Jonah, the child recognizes it as a place of refuge and reflection. The fish, instead of being a symbol of judgment, becomes a symbol of God's patience and mercy, providing Jonah with the time and space he needs to make the right choice. As Erwin McManus says in the [video](#)¹, child-like wonder and curiosity is the key to spiritual vitality.

What closes us off to this curiosity and wonder I believe is when we feel we have something to defend—a belief, or our sense of self (as good, fair, just people) or simply our time or energy. Jesus, who shares our broken beloved humanity is not immune from this defensiveness. In the story just before the one we just heard, Jesus has a confrontation with members of a Jewish sect called the Pharisees, who are upset that Jesus' disciples don't wash their hands before eating. The Pharisees are a group who among other things devote themselves to bringing some of the practices of temple worship into daily life. Handwashing is one of those practices, rooted in the Hebrew scripture concept of purity. Purity is a complex concept that has practical health applications in terms of food safety and hygiene, and theological applications in terms of how one prepares to worship and approach the Holy. So, whether you practice some of these purity rituals becomes a way of defining who is a Jew and who is a gentile (non-Jew). Jesus blasts the Pharisees for their pre-occupation with externals at the expense of what those externals represent. He admonishes them, it's not what you see on the outside that God cares about, how clean your hands are, what you eat, who you associate with, it's what's in the heart that is much more important: Is your heart pure? That's the point of the practices and that's the question that is important to Jesus.

After this encounter Jesus is tired and he wants to get away, he heads to a place where he thinks he will lie low for a while, a place far enough that no one will recognize him—Tyre, in modern day southern Lebanon. This is A non-Jewish gentile area, whose

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1cTO9gDUvtQ>

inhabitants are by definition impure, and more than cursory interactions should be avoided. Which is just fine with Jesus. But the story tells us he can't escape notice.

Not only a gentile, but a gentile woman approaches him. Not only is she impure, but she is also breaking the prohibition against women speaking to men to which they are not related. She kneels at his feet and begs that he heal her daughter. Have you ever been asked to do one more thing, take on one more project when you're already at the end of your rope? When you're physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually exhausted? How do you react? Do you react thoughtfully, with compassion? No of course not, you react instinctively. Jesus, in all his humanity, perhaps fuelled by exhaustion and the frustration of not being able to get away reacts not with wonder and curiosity but with a defensiveness rooted in prejudice; "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Ouch!

But this gentile woman isn't giving up. She is possessed by love, her heart burns with compassion and zeal for the healing of her child, and she takes a great risk in speaking to this strange man; "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." She doesn't care about artificial boundaries between pure and im-pure, between male and female, she cares only about her daughter, her only concerns are life and love. Funny thing, isn't it? It's what Jesus preaches one chapter back. She speaks Jesus' own truth, God's truth back to him.

When Jesus hears this truth, it brings him back to himself. He drops the defensiveness and opens himself to this revelation of God, of Love being revealed to him in the gentile woman. Jesus no longer reacts out of defensiveness but instead responds from a place of curiosity and wonder. What allows him to get there are humility and compassion. He could ignore or even berate the woman, and it would be met with approval by others as the socially acceptable thing to do. But he doesn't care that God's truth comes to him through a gentile woman; he acknowledges that she is right. The important thing is that God's truth is spoken: the power of life and love over and against ethnic, gender and religious divisions. Humility opens him up to curiosity and wonder.

His second response is compassion. He heals the girl; he shows compassion toward the mother and her daughter. Here is something else—Jesus is compassionate toward himself. He doesn't obsess about his mistake; he doesn't waste precious energy beating himself up. He learns and he moves on, all the wiser for his encounter with this unexpected teacher. Jesus doesn't expect himself to be perfect and the result is that he is unburdened from having or needing to defend himself and opens himself up to receive God's revelation of Love.

To be Christian is not to strive to be perfect with it's attendant defensiveness, it's not about striving at all. It's about opening ourselves to the presence and movement of God around us. Which requires curiosity and wonder. That's what being faithful is all about. It's a journey of learning and growth in the ways of Love.

Over the years I have found one of the challenges in recruiting Sunday School leaders is the sense from many that you're going in there to give kids correct answers about the bible, about God and Jesus, about right and wrong. In other words that you're going in there as an expert. To be a good Sunday school teacher, or parent for that matter, we do not need to be people who have arrived; God simply calls us to be on the way, seeking, finding, rejoicing in what we find², then letting go and seeking, finding and rejoicing again and sharing that experience and encouraging it in children. In doing so we model the way of Jesus who did not live life as a fearful weary traveller seeking a safe destination but an adventure where Love presents itself to us in often surprising forms.

May be blessed with humility and compassion that we might live with wonder and curiosity experiencing the glory of God all around us. Welcome back! Amen.

Rev. Joe Gaspar

² Catherine Stonehouse, *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey: Nurturing a Life of Faith*, found at <https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/261635-joining-children-on-the-spiritual-journey-nurturing-a-life-of-faith>.