

“Persistence”

The Reverend Doctor Barbara Edema, Bridge Pastor

September 9, 2018 (Rally Sunday)

Mark 7:24-37 James 2:1-17

Introduction... Chelsea to Tennessee...Eight years praying for a church....

Our Gospel story is recorded in both Matthew and Mark.

In Mark’s Gospel, the previous passage shows Jesus teaching the church leaders that a person cannot be defiled by something from outside. The disciples had not washed their hands before eating. The Pharisees and Scribes condescended to, and condemned Jesus and his disciples for defilement. Jesus makes it clear that it is not anything from the outside that defiles a person, but only what comes from the inside out. Our words and attitudes and actions.

Our passage has Jesus walking purposefully into Gentile territory, a people of defilement for any Jew. He was also in a place where the Gentiles were known for taking advantage of the Jews who lived in the villages in the outskirts of the territory. Jesus had been on a busy Savior tour, being rejected by his hometown, hearing about the death of his cousin, John the Baptist, murdered at the whim of a girl who had an angry mother, feeding thousands of people with a tiny bit of food, walking on water and calming a storm. And now this judgement from the church leaders.

So, maybe that’s why he was so rude to the Syrophenician woman.

I find it interesting that this woman was Phoenician. Phoenicia belonged administratively to Syria – hence, Syrophenician.

We’re talking about a Syrian woman; a Syrian mother desperate to save her sick child.

And there is nothing new under the sun...

She barges into the house where Jesus is trying to hide out for a while and asks for a miracle. She has heard through the Phoenician grapevine that Jesus sprinkled miracles everywhere. She saw him, and immediately bowed down.

“Please cast the demon out of my daughter.”

“Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the food from the children and throw it to the dogs.”

The Jews were the children and the Gentiles were the dogs. Jesus came first for the Jews, and then to expand to the rest of the world. This desperate mother decided this was the moment to expand. She demanded expansion.

“Even the dogs get the crumbs the children drop on the floor.”

And Jesus expands. “Your daughter is healed.”

Because a crumb of a miracle is still a miracle.

The second healing story is for a deaf man with difficulty speaking. Also, a gentile. His friends bring him to Jesus and Jesus heals him with fingertips and spit. O, for a Thousand Tongues to Sing!

Jesus' ministry, love, and miracles expand in these two healing stories. Because of the persistence of others, two Gentiles are healed and the word spreads even though Jesus tells the witnesses not to say anything.

The Syrian mother will not back down for her daughter. She will take the insult of being a dog because her purpose is bigger than herself. She is also demanding expansion.

It helps to understand that in the 1st century the poor, infirm, orphaned, mentally ill, people from other cultures and many women were denigrated and lived with a low status.

And there is nothing new under the sun...

We still live in a world of judgment and denigration. Some people feel free to let hate and cruelty against anyone who is different flow freely.

In James Epistle the message of faith and action is spelled out clearly. There can be no acts of favoritism if we call ourselves Christian. Distinctions and judgments aren't acceptable if we call ourselves Christians. James reiterates Jesus' words "You must love your neighbor as yourself."

If any brother or sister is in need, we are commanded to expand the grace and love of Jesus Christ by caring with action. If someone is hungry, we feed. If someone is thirsty, we give a cup of cool water. If someone is naked, we clothe them. If someone is persecuted for no reason other than color of skin, religion, who they love, or their status in this world, we fight for their right as human beings to live in the love and light of God.

We have watched our country decrease in tolerance, acceptance, and basic kindness. We have seen how certain people claim that this country is for only one color of person with one religious belief system. Any one else is not part of the benefits of this country.

And so, today we stand and demand to expand once again. We stand like a desperate mother and demand equity for all people. We stand and demand healing for fellow citizens and for those who aren't citizens but are seeking safety at our borders. We stand and demand that leaders of this country must care more for the people of this country than their own political careers.

Jesus Christ brought a revolution to the world. He came for the people of Israel, but his saving grace was meant for all. God's great plan for redemption was to save the world, not a part of it.

God does not build walls around certain groups or individuals. God does not pick and choose certain people. God chose the world. God's love expands beyond all barriers.

We have the choice to accept or reject the gift of life. We have the choice to build walls that keep God out. We have the choice to share the Good News or spread judgment and persecution.

The passages this morning show what happens when compassionate people demand to expand. A mother demands Jesus to expand his grace and mercy to her Gentile child. Friends bring their deaf friend and their pleadings are a demand to expand the grace and mercy of Jesus. James demands

to expand our attentions to all people, not just the ones we like. He demands to expand faith and works to bring true change to the lives of others.

What are we persistent about? Who are we persistent for? How willing are we to bother God with constant calls for justice?

This church is amazing. I've only been here one week, but it didn't take long to realize how much you are doing in the persistence department. I read the bulletin:

Blessings in a Backpack. Ken's Coat Closet. Rock the Block. AA meetings. AL-ANON meetings. Sisters of Ruth. Trunk or Treat. Food Pantry collections.

I'm learning about these and other ways this church is determined to be the heart, hands, and mind of Christ. It doesn't take many people who persist to make a difference for the "least of these." It doesn't take a million good ideas to make a change. I am excited to be with you as the good work of First Congregational Church continues. Let's do this: Let's remember first, we bow down. We show honor to the one we call Lord. Then we will stand, and we will persist together. We will demand to expand the love of God to all we meet. Because the crumbs from the Bread of Life belong to everyone. God says so. May we persist with great joy in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, the Bread of Life, and the Savior of the world. Amen.