

Green Hill Presbyterian Church
“Teaching Jesus a Lesson”
Thomas G. Speers, III
Ordinary 23—September 9, 2018

Lessons: James 2:1-10, 14-17; Mark 7:24-37

When I lived outside of Glasgow in Scotland, I had the fun one day of walking to the University and discovering a small crowd gathered across the street from a theater. I joined crowd and waited a couple of minutes. Very soon a Bentley drove up, and out stepped Charles the Prince of Wales. I could hardly believe it. There was the next in line to the British Throne standing just across the street from where I was standing.

The prince greeted several people, and I remember two in particular. One was a man in a business suit, very well groomed, and the other I would describe as a punker, dressed all in black, with black spiked hair and a dog collar with spikes around his neck. What struck me was that the Prince greeted them in exactly the same way. I don't know what he was thinking on the inside and I don't know anything about either of the two men he greeted. I'm sure he's been trained from an early age to greet all kinds of people with the same warm and caring manner. I went away that afternoon particularly aware of my own tendency to “play favorites,” my own biases and prejudices, and I was grateful that a rather famous human being had modeled for me a behavior I'd like to learn.

James writes to the church about the distinctions people make. Rich people were being given seats of honor, and poor people were being put in the back. Such partiality James says is sinful and of course that sin is still with us. We know about the distinctions we make according to class. Someone obviously poor comes in here and I'm not sure they would receive the same kind of welcome that someone who seems to be much more nicely dressed receives. We have pride in being a welcoming community—and we are, yet we also know how people who act or look differently can be so easily overlooked, pushed aside, ignored. We don't mean to be this way, but truth be told we are. All of us along the way have had times when we showed partiality, when we made distinctions between people, when we played favorites, and this has been going on for a very long time.

The surprise in today's other lesson is that Jesus himself seems to be guilty of just this kind of behavior. Jesus perhaps was under a lot of stress. His cousin and friend John the Baptist had been murdered. His hand-picked disciples were turning out to be a bit thick in their heads, not understanding what he was trying to teach them. The religious authorities were trying to catch him saying anything that smelled of heresy. In the midst of all that stress, he managed to get away and didn't want anyone to know where he was, yet before he can even begin to unwind this woman comes barging in uninvited. The interruption by itself is bad enough. The fact that a woman has done the interrupting is worse. The fact that the woman is a Gentile is perhaps worst of all.

Jesus lived in a time when Jews did not speak with Gentiles and women did not speak to men uninvited. No proper woman would have interrupted Jesus in this way. Maybe that explains how Jesus could utter such uncharacteristic words to this stranger. She begs Jesus to heal her daughter. Any parent who has suffered because their child was sick will understand how this woman felt. Jesus responds to her request: “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.”

Are you kidding me? Jesus said that? This doesn't sound like him. Some people try to suggest that he really was smiling all the while, playing a little practical joke, testing the disciples to see if they were really paying attention, but I don't see that in the text. I know that Jesus is quite clear throughout the gospels that God's message of salvation is first for the people of Israel. And I know that the early church struggled as it opened its doors wide to non-Jews. The earliest tensions in the church

surrounded the relationships between Jewish and Gentile Christians. When you've been taught throughout scripture that you should not associate with people who are supposedly unclean, it is difficult to help an outsider. To be fair, maybe Jesus is hesitant to help this woman because he fears that if he starts giving his energy and attention to Gentiles, he won't have enough left for the people of Israel who are his central focus. He's got to take care of his own people first. It is bad enough that he hardly has time to recover from the needs of his own people, if he helps an outsider then maybe he'll be overwhelmed by their needs too. Here in this church, we don't usually give money to people who come in off the street. If we did the word would go out and suddenly most of the needy people in this part of Delaware would be knocking at our doors. We help a lot of people, but we try to be good stewards with what we've been given. There are more responsible ways to support those in need. Maybe that's behind what Jesus says to this woman.

Nevertheless, I listen to these words from Jesus and they feel offensive, yet the woman isn't offended. She's too strong a mother and much too concerned about her daughter's health to let any harsh words get in her way. "Sir," she says standing tall, "even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." That seems to be the lesson Jesus needed to hear. He sends her off to discover a daughter now healed. It is as if she teaches him a lesson.

There are all kinds of things to learn from this story. The first might be our very real and continuing tendency to make distinctions. Even Jesus did it, how can we possibly expect not to? Yet all those distinctions, those favorites, that partiality, these are sinful. They do not represent who we are supposed to be. Like Jesus, we may need Gentile women to remind us that even the so-called dogs have a place at the table.

The Gentile woman offers an example for us because, like countless other oppressed persons before and after her, she stands tall and refuses to accept the lie that she is not as worthy as any other human being. She refuses to listen to a world that says she is a nobody because she listens to a God who proclaims she is somebody. The next time someone tries to put you down because you don't run in the right crowd, the next time someone tries to put you out because you don't look the right way, the next time someone tries to push you aside because you don't fit their mold of what is proper, the next time someone tries to say you are not as important because you don't have the most popular opinions, remember this Gentile woman and stand tall.

Max Lucado has written a wonderful children's book called You Are Special. It is the story of Wemmicks, little wooden people who spend their days giving each other stickers: stars and dots. The pretty Wemmicks, those with smooth wood and fine paint always get stars. But if your wood is rough or your paint chipped, the Wemmicks give dots. They show all kinds of partiality. Punchinello had lots of dots to the point that he began to believe that he deserved them until one day when he met a woman who had no dots or stars. They just didn't stick to her. They didn't stick to her because she spent time every day with the woodcarver who made her. So Punchinello finds the courage to visit Eli the woodcarver who was delighted to see him. He'd been waiting for him. He told him he was special and Punchinello wondered why. He couldn't walk fast or jump; his paint was peeling. How could he be special? He wondered why he mattered so much to Eli and Eli very slowly said, "Because you're mine. That's why you matter to me." Eli explained that the stickers only stick if they matter to you. "The more you trust my love," his creator explained, "the less you care about their stickers." The Wemmick wasn't sure he understood, but as he started out the door, Eli said: "Remember, you are special because I made you. And I don't make mistakes." "Punchinello didn't stop, but in his heart he thought, I think he really means it. And when he did, a dot fell to the ground."¹

The Gentile Woman teaches us all a lesson that stickers only stick if they matter to you. The

¹ Max Lucado, You Are Special. Crossway Books © 1997

more you know about God, the less you care about their stickers. She is an example to oppressed and ostracized people everywhere. Stand tall and claim your place at the table.

Some people think that Jesus was perfect from the moment he was born. I don't in part because that would make him less like the rest of us. I like to think that he grew, that he continued to learn more about people and about God as he carried out his ministry. I like to think that this Gentile woman taught him a lesson because in fact after his exchange with her, he continues in Gentile territory. He heals a deaf man, another Gentile and then the very next story is the one about feeding four thousand people. The disciples had only seven loaves and a few small fish, but with the blessing of Jesus they provide food enough for everyone with seven full baskets left over.

The woman asked for crumbs, and maybe thanks to her the crowds receive much more. We're here today, most of us, because of people like that Gentile woman, who had the conviction and courage and confidence to teach all of us a lesson.

Let us pray: Loving God, in a world too full of division, too ready to make distinctions, too eager to put others down, help us to learn the lesson that all God's people have a place at the table—Jews and Gentiles together, men and women together, all of us together. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.