



WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN  
CHURCH

“Who’s Under the Table?”

Sermon preached by Evans Presley-McGowan

September 6, 2009

Scripture Passage: Proverbs 22: 1-2, 8-9, 22-3; Mk 7:24-30

It is a pleasure to be with you today. Since I moved here at the age of 12, I have grown up in this church and have been nurtured by many people here. I am grateful for your continued faithfulness in God and in me.

It has been a busy weekend - a good friend, Mike Gnade, whom many of you know and who works with the youth, got married yesterday, and I was part of the wedding party. And now that I live in California, those cross-country plane trips can do a number on you. But the airlines try to make it as fun as possible - like on the Delta plane I flew, they had these personal screens in the headrest right in front of you, loaded with all kinds of goodies: movies, games, tv, music, trivia, you name it - it's right there, at your fingertips. Gone are the days of everyone craning their necks to watch the one movie screen - now everyone gets to choose what they want to do, watch, play or listen to, depending on how they feel. Did you know more people visit the Mall of America every year, than Walt Disney World, Graceland and the Grand Canyon - *combined!* And it's true of our world at large - there are just so many choices wherever we go, whether it's in the grocery store, online or even now on a plane.

And then last night, I watched two friends make a lifelong commitment to each other. In a world of choice, where everything can be changed at whim according to your mood or preference, committing to something or someone has become a rare thing. Try to schedule a meeting and everyone scrambles for their calendars or iPhones, saying, "well, it depends on such-and-such." Or sit down with your family to watch a movie and try to decide on something that everyone likes - there's just too many choices! We don't lock ourselves into an insurance policy or an investment option because rates might change!

We become afraid of committing to something, because something better could be out there waiting for us.

But we have good reason not to commit to things, to keep our options open. After all, those health insurance companies are not our friends, refusing to admit us based on "pre-existing conditions" and dropping us cold when we get sick. Those corporations are not guaranteeing our pensions anymore, forcing us out of our jobs or letting us go at the drop of a hat or a dip in the stock price. We live in uncertain times: not holding onto something gives us the flexibility we need to survive.

Yet in an "it depends" culture, when do we say "It matters"? When everything is about choice and contingency, how do we remain committed... to our partners, to our families, to our communities, to God? Are we holding onto our freedom of choice, or our commitment to God?

At least, that's how Jesus framed the question. Prior to our passage here in Mark, Jesus berates the Pharisees for putting the law ahead of the people's welfare. His accusation: "*You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.*" **Have we abandoned our commitment to God, in favor of our own free choices?**

Little did Jesus know that his own words would be put to the test by a gentile woman. Let's look at the context in which the story unfolds, as the setting, the woman and her actions all give us important keys to understanding what is happening.

First, the setting: Jesus has left the Pharisees in the predominantly Jewish area of Judea, and he and his disciples enter the region of Tyre, a port city on the Mediterranean Sea in northern Palestine: think modern-day Lebanon. Tyre and its sister city Sidon, which appears in some texts, are known throughout the Jewish world as wealthy city-states: Situated strategically on the Mediterranean Sea, they bustled with activity as key trading centers. They used their wealth to purchase grain for bread and grapes for wine from the fertile regions of Judea and Galilee. Many Jewish peasants worked these fields and vineyards as vassals on the land. Their overseers owned the land and were turning a profit on these cash crops, selling the grain and grapes to Tyre for tidy sum... and leaving the left over "crumbs" to the peasants. Thus, Tyre was instrumental in supporting an economic system that oppressed the Jews, and Jesus walks directly into the heart of it as he goes into a private home to be alone. You can almost see Jesus going on a retreat, to take a break from all the preaching.

Then this woman *barges* into his private chateau, *bows* at his feet and *begs* healing for her daughter. Only then Mark tells us she is a **Gentile, of Syrophenician** origin... perhaps as an excuse for her behavior? Syrophenician is a socio-political description: Syro- we still hear it in the modern-day nation of Syria, and Phoenician, the people of the Mediterranean Sea from whom we get our alphabet. This woman, being a gentile, is not one of the Jews, and furthermore is not from Judea or Samaria, but rather from a wealthy, outside and even hostile region: Tyre is a favorite target for condemnation by the prophets Isaiah, Ezekiel and Joel. So rephrase the passage, Mark states that "This woman is a foreigner, not of our religion, race or nation."

And what does she do? She enters a **private** home and comes to Jesus **alone**. This is no ordinary woman. The fact that Jesus "did not want anyone to know he was there" (v.24) means that this woman probably had very well-connected sources. She knew where to find Jesus, despite his best efforts to hide. But women were not allowed to talk to men in public, save perhaps at a well, and NEVER would a woman enter a home alone, uninvited. Her actions are very odd and audacious for a woman in this time period, and given the region in which they were, she is a Hellenized woman, educated in Greek language and custom. To be educated and this well-connected, one had to be rich.

Yet this wealthy woman is in dire straits not knowing what to do with a daughter at home possessed by an unclean spirit. In desperation, the woman swallows her pride and breaks all customs to fall at the feet of this Galilean prophet. She is committed.

So what is the prophet's response? "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." How is it fair for me to help **you**, to sacrifice *my* time or divert my attention from *my* people. What about *my* children who have suffered from *your* people's injustice for so long? I am not committed to you - I am committed to my people.

Our Holy Scriptures command that we do not rob the poor because they are poor, yet you have made off well, haven't you, from the backs of the Jews, my poor people?

Perhaps Jesus is a little irritated that his little summer retreat is being interrupted by this woman. Can't the guy get some rest? Yet truth rings in his words: Jesus speaks of Justice, and we can all resonate with that.

But justice comes in two parts: judgment and mercy. Jesus has delivered the judgment: you are a dog who has exploited my people and you are not worthy of my blessing.

The woman then reminds Jesus of mercy. And she does it in a very clever way: "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." She uses Jesus' own analogy to further her point: we might be dogs, but we still need to eat. And the crumbs are enough for us: We will eat the crumbs, that your people have survived on for so long. Would you deny us those crumbs?

What *about* the crumbs? Earlier in Mark we get an answer: After Jesus feeds the five thousand, there are 12 baskets of crumbs left over, symbolizing the twelve tribes of Israel. The message is clear: what is leftover from this meal is meant for his people, the Jews. But this woman challenges that assumption: if the crumbs are just for the Jews, is that a human tradition or a commandment from God? You are committed to your people, Jesus, but about the rest of us - especially those in need? Won't you help us, Jesus?

You see, this woman, being a Gentile, educated and wealthy, comes from a different context than the Jewish peasants who saved every crumb. Well-to-do persons of this time did not have silverware, so instead they would tear off pieces of bread, and then use it to pinch their food to eat without getting their hands dirty. As the bread got all mushy and filthy, they would throw these scraps or "crumbs" under the table, to feed the dogs. For them the leftover crumbs were scraps of waste, not worthy to be eaten, save by dogs. So for the woman to say even the dogs eat the scraps from the table, means that she is willing to take what she can get... even if it means humbling herself below the table of the Jews, acting as a dog.

And here Jesus was probably reminded of the wisdom of Proverbs: "The rich and the poor have this in common: the Lord is the maker of them all." How was this rich woman's daughter any different than a poor Jewish woman's daughter? The woman compels Jesus to think of her not as a rich person, or an enemy, or someone who has exploited his people - but as a fellow human being, a child of the same God.

Just as her identity has been challenged by Jesus, so the woman challenges Jesus' identity:

"Jesus, aren't YOU the one who says to treat others how you would like to be treated? Is this how you are treating me?"

"Aren't YOU the one who calms the sea? Who heals the sick? Who makes the lame walk, the blind see, the mute speak and the dead live again?"

"Aren't YOU the one who fed the five thousand at the sea of Galilee?"

"Don't you have a crumb for me?"

The critically acclaimed movie *The Visitor*, which I highly recommend, has this tagline:

"You can live your whole life and never know who you are...  
until you see the world through the eyes of others."

The problem with our "it depends" world, where we assert our freedom to choose wherever, whenever we want, is that we're stuck seeing the world from our own perspective, our own eyes. Yet when we commit to another, we commit to seeing the world through their eyes, not just our own. The woman challenges Jesus to see through the eyes of this woman and expand God's grace to the world. This woman "plays Jesus," challenging him to rethink his ways, his mission, his entire purpose in life... to broaden his ministry and his heart to all peoples, not just his own. And she trusts that "just the crumbs" will be enough to heal her daughter. Soon afterward this story there is another feeding story, where Jesus feeds four thousand people and 7 baskets of crumbs leftover. The number seven represents the wholeness or completion of creation. The whole world will hear and receive the good graces of God.

An early Christian community once wrote:

"Just as these crumbs were scattered upon the mountains, and being gathered together became one, so may your church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into your kingdom" (Didache 9:8)

If we are to "be gathered together from the ends of the earth," we must begin to commit to one another. We can commit to one another because God is committed to us. Proverbs also reminds us that "those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor." Today, let us share this feast with the poor. Let us feed the hungry, cloth the naked, heal the sick, visit those in prison, speak out for those less fortunate, protest against injustices, and be committed to peace and justice, love and hope.

It all begins here, when we gather at this table. We come to this table because Jesus welcomes all to it - the Jews and the Gentiles, the poor and the rich, the sick and the healthy - and because God has chosen each of us, and committed God's very self to the well-being of creation and the restoration of God's kingdom here on earth. God is committed to welcoming ALL to the table - we should do likewise.

So, as we celebrate communion today, let us remember the commitments we have made to each other. May we feel these commitments as blessings, not burdens, as they help us see the world not just from our own eyes, but another's. And may we recommit ourselves to Jesus and the kingdom he preached, saying our vows "to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish; from this day forward until death do we meet - forever. Amen.