

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 6, 2009

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The story of the Syrophenician woman that we just heard from the Gospel of Mark. I want to focus this morning on that story, because I think it is a challenging story to hear and a challenging story to know how to apply in our own lives. The gospel tells us that Jesus goes up to the region of Tyre, it's above upper Galilee and he didn't want anyone to know he was there; he took refuge in a house; it sounds like he needed a day off. And he just wanted rest and some time away. And a woman, a Syrophenician woman, came to him and begged him to cast a demon, an unclean spirit out of her daughter and Jesus says to her "Let the children be fed first for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs. Let the children be fed first. I suggest that what Jesus is referring to here is the children of Israel. In Jesus' early ministry he felt that the focus of his own ministry and message and healing was to his own people, to the Jewish people and so for him "the children" that he is referring to in this passage, "let the children be fed first". Its like -- if you will -- let my people be fed first; my call is to the Jewish people. I need to attend and nourish them first and the Syrophenician woman was a Gentile, a non-Jew. So Jesus says "Let the children be fed first" for its not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs. Now this is a very harsh thing for us to hear Jesus say. To refer to someone as a dog in the first century world was very very derogatory. Now if I were happen to refer to one of you as Henry, you would know that I have just paid you perhaps one of the highest compliments I could. Henry is the name of our dog -- Marcus's and my dog and those of you who know us know that we are snockered with Henry, so for us dogs may be in a slightly different category. But in the first century world, a dog was an unclean animal and shameless. Dogs will do all kinds of things in public without a second thought; they will scratch or sniff or poop or pee or whatever, without any self-consciousness. So to address someone or name someone as being a dog in the first century world was to really dismiss and degrade them; and in this text from Mark we hear Jesus refer to the Syrophenician woman as a dog. I sometimes wonder why Mark put this story in his Gospel, but the story does not end here. The woman answers him "Sir (and in some translations it even says "Lord") so she refers to him with deftness -- "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs. She takes this metaphor that Jesus uses and sort of turns it on a tack and she changes it. I suggest that even dogs will take the crumbs from the table. She has challenged Jesus and perhaps this is the only place, certainly in the Gospel of Mark, where someone has bested him in an argument, because he goes on to say: "because you have said this, your daughter is made well". Now let me say one more thing about this reference to dogs because the hearers of Mark's Gospel would have gotten this; they would have understood it. A number of us know that there was a movement in first century -- actually before first century and into the time of Jesus that was called the Cynic movement. The Cynics were a group who challenged the taken for granted social and religious assumptions and customs that determined one's sort of default behaviors in public or how one is supposed to act and so forth. The cynic movement was particularly critical of social conventions, social norms, assumptions about people, classifications, understandings that got

in the way of caring for the needy or the poor. The Greek root for the word we translate “cynic” – the Greek root is “dog”. So when the Syrophenician woman allows herself in a sense to take on that reference of “dog” and says “even the dogs get the crumbs from the table”, she is also – and to Mark’s hearers would have understood this, she also assumes this notion of dog and cynic as one that challenges taken for granted assumptions about what is socially appropriate or not. And in that interestingly enough her being called a “dog” or a “cynic” is actually quite apt. This is a brilliant response on her part – a brilliant response. Jesus she knows is someone who proclaims the importance of not letting boundaries or social conventions or your attitudes about people get in the way of your compassion of attending to the needs of others, of attending to the poor and so forth. But in this exchange **he says that because she’s a** Syrophenician, a Greek, she has made a request for her household and most often in the first century world, a male will make the request for his household, but she comes and makes a request for the household for her daughter, she comes as a Greek, someone that is not the priority in his ministry, or so he feels on this day. I don’t know if her gender has anything to do with this or not, but Jesus dismisses her as not being important for him to attend to, which is just the opposite really of how he has taught and even how she understands him, so she, in the spirit of the cynic movement challenges his assumption that she should not be helped by him. And Jesus is so taken by her response and in a sense her argument, he says “for saying this you may go. The demon has left your daughter”. So she goes home and she finds her child lying on the bed and the demon is gone. This is a very interesting story, very clever, it’s very provocative and I think one of the things that really strikes me in this story is that Jesus changes his mind. Jesus changes his mind. He is given a different angle on his own thoughts. He’s seeing things from a slightly different perspective; he was open to it, but he heard it, he got it, he changed his mind, and this as a result affected his dynamics with her and one of the things that came from it was a healing. So what might we learn from Jesus and the Syrophenician woman today. One thing I suggest is that it’s O.K. to change our minds about things. Jesus did it and he did it, according to this text, without embarrassment without apology, he saw something differently and he changed his mind and that affected his actions. Jesus changed his mind. We can change our mind and there are many times when we are really called to do so. And from the Syrophenician woman, perhaps her presence in the story today is an encouragement to us to be bold, clever if we need to be, to be bold about challenging some of the assumptions about how we define things or how we think things are supposed to be or what things need. The letter to James talks about favoritism and how can you really claim a favorite or partiality and say that you are a believer in the Lord? He goes on to say, you know we make distinctions, distinctions that we make among ourselves and in so doing we become judges. Perhaps we are called to be bold about challenging some of our own assumptions, about what we think things need or who we think people are or what they represent – everything from what a Democrat is or a Republican, or what it means to be an Episcopalian or what it means for Trinity to do this or that or not or what it means to be gay, lesbian or transgender. We may have some preconceived notions about what we think this means about this person and their relationship to society; or about the poor; we might have some ideas about we kinda know how they got there. I suggest that on this Labor Day week end perhaps our labor should be to be bold about challenging ourselves, about some taken for granted

notions we have about the way things are and be open to change and new possibilities. I'm going to take the liberty of telling a story on myself and I do so as an analogy that maybe will connect with you in some way. I've learned something about myself that very often if I'm going into a situation that I'm not completely comfortable in or I don't know what the outcomes are going to be, or I'm anxious, there're some unknowns, new possibilities maybe. But I often go into a situation sort of already tense and ready, prepared for maybe the worst or I'm ready to be defensive or I'm ready to be offensive; or I'm ready to try to have a retort and my whole body is already engaged in being on the defensive. Now this is not always consciously; I do not do this consciously but I go into a situation that actually might be neutral, but I'll go in with all of this anxiety and you know where it comes from? My past. Some of this is tension and anxiety and defenses and self-talk and all kinds of things that come from years ago that kind of prepared me –uh oh – if you're going to be in a situation you'd better be ready or you'd better be on the defensive – O.K. -- and everything in me is already locked in for that response. And it doesn't really leave much room for picking up new messages or perhaps seeing the situation in real time and so that reactivity also can signal other people around me and they can see that – and on it goes. My point is that in bringing assumptions that we may have from the past, conscious or not, but bringing a lot of stuff with us that we have not re-examined or where we don't take the time to really be in – if you will -- the present moment to see what is at hand, we will bring assumptions with us that can not only rob us of potential opportunities that are right fresh in our midst, but will therefore skew the direction of the future, because the present is really being affected by what you bring from the past and whatever opportunities might be in the moment, you might miss them because you're already thinking along other lines. Now you might have your own analogies for this and it might be your assumptions about people, places, things, what you should do or not do in these times in our nation and even here at Trinity. This is a time, an important time, to re-evaluate, challenge ourselves about assumptions we have about how things are going to look or how things are going to be or what possible outcomes there may be. This is an opportunity for us today and the Syrophoenician woman and Jesus I think are our great queues and mentors today, to be bold about re-evaluating some of our assumptions and be willing to change our mind and let something new and different happen. Our collect says today trust, trust in God; God wants to save you, heal you, free you. We get too stuck in our places and then we can't move, we can't transform, we can't change, we can't be open to new things. God is here to help us. As the wonderful prophet, Isaiah says: "Don't be fearful of heart, be strong. Here is your God." God will come and help you and when we are bold enough to re-examine our assumptions and our conventional thinking and when we are willing without shame or defensiveness or apology to change our minds – oh, now I get it; it is like the eyes of the blind that are opened. Now I see something that I didn't see before because I was either stuck in some way or not even looking in the right place. Or as Isaiah says: "the ears of the deaf will become unstopped". Maybe if we challenge ourselves, be open to change, we will hear something new, we will realize that we have actually been tone deaf to some things because we've been stuck in an old past place that really has nothing to do with what is sounding in the moment. Maybe the tone of the speechless will be set free, maybe some of us will find our own voice or be able to sing a new song and it will bring us joy. So I encourage us to think about challenging our assumptions and to be open to change. Come to

Jesus, make your way to him, be bold, be bold in your asking, be bold in your desire for change and he will change with you; he will be with you every step of the way and then together – together it will be an occasion for healing that you've longed for and like the Syrophenician woman that you have begged for – a healing that can change your life.