

“Practice what you preach” A sermon by Lee Ireland  
Cathedral City Community Presbyterian Church  
September 9, 2018, Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Mark 7:24-37

Let us pray together: Open our eyes to see your Spirit in our life. Open our hearts to receive the blessings you send each day. Guide us with your wisdom so that through us Christ may walk on the earth once again. Amen.

‘Practice what you preach.’ Have you heard this saying before? Have you used this saying? I know I have. Practice what you preach means to do or act the way you advise others to do or act. The opposite: hypocrisy – saying one thing and doing another. We talked about hypocrites last week. What they say and what is in their heart are two different things.

Practice what you preach. Perhaps this phrase may be why we find Jesus’ words in today’s reading from Mark rather shocking. Jesus spoke rudely to this woman who was only concerned about her daughter’s healing – Jesus implied that she was a dog. Doesn’t Jesus’ life tell us to treat all people equally, to not favor one person over another? Why is he acting this way? Why did Mark include this story in his biography of Jesus? I know I would have preferred that he would have left it out – one less difficult text to explain! Was Jesus practicing what he preaches?

As I prepared for this sermon, I was entertained by the various explanations presented as to why Jesus used the word ‘dog’ in his conversation with this woman – a non-Jew, a gentile, a foreigner. The writers were trying to soften or explain away why Jesus said: **“Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”** – meaning Jesus came to first serve the Jews. You and I can understand why there would be concern. Today, calling someone a dog is usually an insult or at the least a derogatory name. In Jesus’ day, calling someone a dog was an insult whether you translate the word as meaning pet dog or house pet dog – as some writers did. We just don’t expect Jesus to treat someone so rudely! Didn’t Jesus say we were to love our neighbor as ourselves? This woman was Jesus’ neighbor.

So, what are some of those explanations that are presented as to why Jesus used the word ‘dog?’ I’ve already mentioned one. It has to do with the meaning of the word ‘dog’ as Jesus used it. This line of thinking says that Jesus didn’t mean it as an insult because he was talking about a pet dog.

Another line of thinking presents the idea that Jesus was using this interaction with the woman to teach the disciples a lesson. In this interpretation of Jesus’ behavior, Jesus ignores the woman to see what the disciples will do. The disciples tell Jesus that this woman wants his help to heal her daughter. Jesus, talking to the disciples, not to the woman, makes the comment about food for the dogs. At this point, Jesus watches the disciples’ reaction. Will they support her and bring her to him to heal her daughter? Have they learned the lessons he’s been teaching to heal and help the poor or will their prejudice keep them from helping this woman? After seeing that the disciples do not pass the test and the woman’s response, Jesus heals the woman’s daughter.

Yet another line of thinking talks about rabbinic sparring, the verbal debate that rabbi scholars would use to get to the real truth of a situation. This line of thinking assumes the woman and Jesus were in a teasing banter. In this scenario Jesus’ words were not rude but inviting the woman into conversation about the situation. Jesus final response was in admiration of how the woman cleverly replies to his challenge. I like this explanation but I’m not sure the woman, a gentile, was familiar with rabbinic verbal debate.

I'd like to present one more possible scenario; one that really makes you think about Jesus' humanity and divinity. The scripture says, **He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there.** It sounds to me like Jesus was tired of all the crowds and just needed a little alone time, as we call it today. He may have wanted to take time to pray, get his bearings before he continued his ministry. Yet, he could not escape the crowds. This is the second time that Mark mentions Jesus' need to get away. In the previous chapter just before the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus said to his disciples, **"Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while."** Jesus was in such demand that Mark says **they had no leisure even to eat.** Jesus wanted a little rest!

Now I doubt if you and I have had the crowds clamoring for us to heal the sick, but we have been tired and just wanted an hour to ourselves. Perhaps, as a parent, the kids were driving you crazy and you had a moment to rest while they were napping only to have the next-door neighbor stop by to tell you about their unhappy marriage. You wanted to rest, not listen to another person's problems. Or perhaps you just finished a major project – work or volunteer – and want nothing better than to go home, put your feet up and relax only to have your child ask you to help with his homework. You just wanted time to relax.

Could Jesus have been in this same mindset? Perhaps. Could his tiredness affect his behavior? Perhaps. We know that Jesus was fully human and fully divine. We know he was angry when he cleared the temple of money changers and that he wept over Jerusalem and wept at the death of Lazarus. These examples are in the Bible. However, we still often forget the fully human part of Jesus. We don't really think about Jesus experiencing our life's issues. He did. We say that Jesus lived and understood what we go through on a daily basis. How did Jesus gain that understanding? By living many of the same situations we do.

Could Mark be showing us the humanity of Jesus? Did God use the quick response of the woman to bring Jesus to the realization that she was not just a foreigner, a gentile who lived in the next country north of the Hebrew lands, but she was a human being needing help – a neighbor?

It's interesting to ponder what lesson did Jesus learn from this interaction with the woman with the sick child. But the important question to ponder is what lesson do we learn from reading this Bible story?

One author put it quite plainly. "As Christians we claim to follow the works and teaching of Jesus. We are called to act as Jesus does in this passage: to accept criticism, recognize our mistakes, and meet the needs of those in front of us." (The Upper Room Disciplines 2018, p.297)

Jesus tells us to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves. The woman and her sick child were literally Jesus' neighbors. As Jesus' neighbor, I don't believe she initially felt too much love from Jesus.

It's difficult to love our neighbor when we're tired. It's difficult to love our neighbor, especially when we've been trained to be suspicious of our neighbor. It's difficult to love our neighbor when we may feel threatened by those we don't know. But this example shows us that we are to love our neighbor. We are to meet the needs of those who may be different from us. We are, as Jesus said, to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves.

Do you believe this? Do you preach this? More importantly, do you live it? Do you practice what you preach?