

Understanding God's Family

There are some phrases that we frequently use when describing ourselves; yet we rarely truly take them seriously. We call ourselves the children of God, we say that others who are children of God are our brothers and sisters...but then we create these systems and ways of looking at each other which deny the truth of that claim. Although the reading selection from Proverbs 22 which was part of the lectionary today was not read earlier, it contains several verses related to the passages which were read; especially the Letter from James. Proverbs 22: 2—"The rich and the poor have this in common: the Lord is the maker of them all." That is a statement which holds true about each and every group...which is why we can and should call ourselves the children of God, but it also means that all human beings are also God's children and therefore truly are brothers and sisters as well. The reading from Proverbs which contained six selected verses from the 22nd chapter speaks eloquently about God's desire for the relationships between us: "Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity, and the rod of anger will fall. Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor." The call is not for the wealthy to give, but for those who have to be generous and share what they have. There is a warning to those who have power not to use it unjustly, but beyond that...there is a call to be generous with whatever God has given. This seems to be what concerns the author of the Letter from James when he looks around the assembly of those who are professing belief in Jesus, those who are claiming that the Spirit of the Lord has come to abide within them. Our passage opens with the pertinent questions: "My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?" It seems that James is concerned that their understanding of faith is too small. It often seems that people, then and now, may want to reduce faith to a series of statements that people profess to believe. However, for James, faith was what is the operative force in a person's life. People act on the basis of what they believe to be true. So if people say one thing, but then do something else; James would then say that their actual faith is not what they are saying but what they are doing. Their faith is actually what is motivating their actions...The question is whether the faith that actually shapes their lives is faith in Jesus and what he taught or something else...like the values of the world. In this passage social class is the issue that James uses to get at how the assembly gathered in Christ's name is actually answering the question. In verses 1-7 he points out the common human tendency to show deference to those who show visible signs of wealth and disdain for those who seem to belong to the poor or lower class. The value in the illustration used in James is that it is such a commonplace occurrence that it is familiar to us even over 2000 years later. Attention to social class was part of the world in which the epistle of James was written. Wealth and influence typically went together, and those who had wealth expected to be welcomed warmly and receive certain privileges. It was widely understood that lower classes did not deserve the same respect. Things have not noticeably changed in our world. We may know in our minds that God loves everyone, especially the marginalized as scriptures plainly describe this again and again. But our actions speak louder than our words about our belief in this truth. Once again, James' letter names the critical gap between the head and the heart, between knowledge and wisdom. James insists that when God warmly welcomes us, God calls us to also warmly welcome each other just as warmly. God, James tells his readers, won't let them walk past people who are poor leaving them only our flowery

words. God, through James, reminds us that true religion is not just a matter of what we believe or even the rituals we practice. It's certain not a matter of the nice words we sometimes say to people who are needy. God insists that true faith is also about how we treat each other, especially those whom our society so easily overlooks or disdains. Religious practice on Sunday without faithful witness and living the other six days of the week is basically worthless; a form of spiritual death as the Spirit of the Lord is not abiding within. Thankfully, the faith that God has graciously gives to us as God's adopted sons and daughters is a living faith. It is one that doesn't just say and know all the right things about God, God's world and God's creatures. It is one that is a living faith that calls us to participate in God's activity in this world; to be about the witnessing and completion of Jesus' proclamation that the reign of God was near. There are also some problems with elements which have been taken from James Letter. Martin Luther became enamored of the doctrine called Sola Fide or faith alone, that redemption occurs by God's action and grace alone and not through any act or merit of the individual. This is a fundamental tenet of Reformed Tradition. But it is just as firmly held what Luther later declared: "Faith cannot help doing good works constantly. It doesn't stop to ask if good works ought to be done, but before any asks, it already has done them and continues to do them without ceasing." So although Luther did not like the "epistle of straw", in many ways he agreed with the observations made within it. The life of a disciple of Jesus is one of an intricate pattern of worship and work. We cannot love God without loving what God has created, and while Jesus showed clear partiality for the poor and marginalized, his grace-full love and salvation was offered for all. This brings us to the gospel reading from Mark 7:24-37 which is probably one of the most uncomfortable healing stories to be found among those in the gospel accounts. This morning's passage actually contains the accounts of two healings, but it is the first which most upsets our image of Jesus as the always compassionate healer. Jesus heals insiders and outsiders—always—this is one hundred per cent—it can be counted on. When Jesus appears on the scene all boundaries blur and barriers cease and grace flows exponentially—except in this account it seems there are a few bumps in the road. As long as broken and beautiful humankind struggles through and dances with earthly time, there will be the divide between the haves and the have-nots, between the lucky and the not-so-lucky, the powerful and the down-trodden. This is a narrative about those divides and when it seems even our Lord saw them. Mark's narrative gives us the location of this event: "From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre." There is no explanation of why Jesus went to this region...this area that was definitely not Jewish, but gentile. He enters a house, but doesn't want anyone to know that he is there. Again, Mark doesn't give us any reasons for this journey or this seeking of solitude...we are not even told in Mark if his disciples are present with him. It is easy to assume, and most commentators speculate, that Jesus is just very tired. In the gospel of Mark Jesus has been constantly on the go ever since his baptism. Mark's gospel often allows the human nature of Jesus which we affirm to be seen more clearly than does the gospel of Luke and certain than does the gospel of John. So perhaps that is what has caused this journey. But as Mark relates, he could not escape notice. Again, Mark does not explain how this unnamed woman with a little daughter who has an unclean spirit has immediately heard of him or his presence in this house, nor does Mark explain what she has heard. Mark only tells us that having heard that Jesus was there, she came and bowed down at his feet, begging him to cast out the demon from her daughter. At this point Mark tells us about all the reasons this

encounter should not take place. “Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin...” Jesus has crossed the boundary into Gentile territory, now her approach has crossed the obvious barriers of gender, race and ethnicity...there probably isn't a human boundary or barrier that isn't crossed in this interaction. 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.” A couple of commentaries I read called this statement “Jesus being caught with his compassion down.” For the word he used in this verse is indeed a commonly used racial-ethnic slur from the period. Not the usual image we have of our Lord. Two approaches are usually taken to explain this verse: One, Jesus didn't really mean it, it was a test...to see what her response would be and to demonstrate that he would heal the daughter and include her at the table of grace. Two, Jesus was truly fully human as well as fully divine, and as a human being he also learned of God's will and grew in it as he journeyed in his life. The text itself does not answer which explanation is more valid; in many ways it does not matter. This distraught mother however does not accept Jesus' putting off of her request. Accepting the slur, she answered him, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.” This woman asserts that even though she may not be the equal of those Jesus terms the children, she is still part of the household of God...she and her daughter are present...even if they are “under the table”. Therefore, they are deserving of the healing she has requested. Jesus answers her, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.” In many of the healings which Jesus does, they are followed by the comment: “Your faith has made you well” or words to that effect. In this encounter, no mention of faith is made. What seems to have happened is Jesus recognizes the truth of her claim to be a member of the household of God. I would add that faith enters the narrative with verse 30 for having heard Jesus tell her that the demon had left her daughter, she went home...and indeed found the child lying on the bed and the demon gone. She came to Jesus expecting him to heal, to restore, to save. She demanded that he do it because she too was a child of God. In last week's gospel lesson we considered the purity laws and how to best express them because what defiles comes from within. Within this weeks' readings we consider that the best way to express the will of the Father is inclusion. We have moved from the principle to the realization of personal application and wholehearted expression. We have also been shown that not every missed opportunity thus far is a sin of omission, if we learn about the fullness of the kingdom of God and all its glory because God will show us how to grow in our own expression of these values. We are invited into that full and expansive gospel as we read and understand the messages found in our scriptures. And that no matter who we are, who others see us as, how we've been cast out or regulated, the littlest bit of Christ is more than enough to welcome us into the family of God—and that there's nothing anyone else can say about that. And even if we've been given the message that we don't deserve it, we can approach the throne of grace and advocate for ourselves and for our beloved to know the healing power of God, just like the Syrophenician woman. We are also invited to understand that all others belong in the family of God as well...Jesus came to see and understand that God's love was for all people, that there were no outsiders, and so as with the woman he reaches and acts for them and for us...and we are called to do the same. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.