

SERMON  
September 9, 2015  
The Rev. Dr. Phebe L. McPherson

*Even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.* Mark 7

Life is difficult. Don't be fooled. Regardless of how easy we think it is supposed to be—it isn't. Who told us it was supposed to be easy, anyway? Whoever it was, they did us a disservice. The truth is—one of the greatest truths—even the first truth in Buddhism is, “Life is difficult.” It is a great truth because once we see this truth—we transcend it. Once we know it, once we understand it and accept it—well, it's not so bad after all because we realize that “we are all in this together.” I suppose many do not want to see this truth but would rather feel alone with the enormity of their problems, their burdens, their difficulties. I suppose that many want to believe that life should be generally easy. They voice their belief that their difficulties represent a unique kind of affliction that shouldn't be, that somehow has been especially visited upon them, or else upon their families, class, nation, race or species—and not upon others. I'm not pointing fingers! We have all done our share of this! But the truth is that life is a series of problems. We can be defeated or we can solve them. And if not exactly solve them, at least give them the nod and move on. And it is true, that when the fact that life is difficult is no longer such a big deal, if you know what I mean, it eases up. And equally important, we can give our children the “heads up” that life is not supposed to be easy and that there are countless challenges and pain along with joy.

There are some children's books that point in this direction—The Chronicles of Narnia. Alice in Wonderland. Do you remember the situation that White Queen faces in Alice in Wonderland? She is the one who says “ouch” and then pricks her finger. Pain first and then the jab. A bit backwards. A reversal. It's a good thing we don't experience the pain first or I suppose we'd never try anything. But it also doesn't help much if we don't know to expect it.

Problems? It is because of the pain that events or conflicts engender in us—that we call them problems. And since life poses and endless series of events and conflicts—well, we face a series of problems. Welcome to the crowd. We are all in this together. And it's not such a bad thing! Not if you know to expect it. It is the process of meeting and solving problems that gives life it's meaning—that calls forth our courage and our wisdom. Actually, that **CREATES** our courage and wisdom.

Frustration or sadness or loneliness or guilt or regret or anger or fear or anxiety or anguish or despair—completely normal! Haha! Though we all prefer to ignore them, forget them, or pretend they do not exist. They are often as painful as any kind of physical pain, yet, they are the cutting edge! And because of them, we grow mentally and spiritually. There are simple tools to teach ourselves and our children about dealing with pain—simple tools of discipline like in any other “sport.” But that’s another sermon.

Today, I simply want set the stage, the backdrop for the story in Mark’s gospel—the story about the Syrophenician woman who challenged Jesus to see her and to help her, even though she was an outsider. Perhaps the message of this Gospel is, “There are no outsiders. We are all in this together.” By the way, my riff about problems and pain and life is not my own—it’s the way Scott Peck opens his most widely read and acclaimed book, “The Road Less Traveled.” Scott Peck was an American psychiatrist and best-selling author who also wrote about the importance of creating community and established a foundation to study and help others to create healthy communities. He opens his book with these words: “Life is difficult” and he continues to make the point that it’s not helpful to teach or pretend otherwise. We did not fail our way into this condition. It is our common experience. It is what it is to live. What matters is the courage and maturity that it calls forth. And I think he would add in his later books, the creation of community is a sacred and holy gift that draws us close to each other and closer to God.

Now the stage is set. And we turn to the story of Jesus and the Syrophenician woman. Jesus needed to get away, I suppose, needed a little rest. I’m sure he was not without a few hard and heavy things on his mind. So he went incognito to Tyre, a seaside resort, and didn't want anyone to bother him there. But a woman found him - a Syrophenician woman - and begged for help. Her daughter was possessed, torn up by some awful spirit. She was distraught. Unconsolable. Relentless. Her pain was excruciating. She was alone. Frightened. Determined. She approached Jesus. At first Jesus dismissed her with a wave of the hand. She was outside his responsibilities. Outside his scope. He was annoyed. He even refers to her as a dog. Isn’t that often how we treat those who have great pain. Even worse, it’s that how people with great pain—especially social pain—expect to be treated! But in this story—fascinating to imagine why THIS STORY is included in the gospels of Mark and Matthew—she is persistent; she is a mother whose desperate love

brings her to her knees before the one who she believes can help. The woman who is initially unwelcome and annoying is the very person who makes the Gospel Point — who is the teacher in this story. She's the one designated to stretch and change our perspective as she challenges Jesus to include her in his new world.

“We're all in this together! Even the dogs under the table eat the crumble from the children's table.”

Out of her own pain and suffering she is able to see our commonality, the common bond of humanity. This is a huge shift. Not just for this woman. She's the storyline. This is the major shift that makes Christians who we are. That brings us from some small sect of Judaism in a far away place, long long ago and puts us on the world stage with a mission of salvation, justice, and peace. Even the dogs are deserving. There is no one excluded from the love and mercy of God. Why? Because we are all in this thing called “Life” together. And when we are pricked, we all bleed. That's not IF but WHEN. And we are all in need of God's love and mercy. We are all in need of being part of God's caring, sustaining, and life-giving community.

On this Labor Day weekend we set aside a time to remember and be grateful for the ordinary people who keep the country moving. This is a time to remember that we are all in this together. We've each got our own story and we each need a faith that can carry us through this life. A sentimental ungrounded faith—one that causes us to turn away from our difficulties—leaves us without the vision and goals to carry us through. Don't settle for a narrow and small faith. Just ask the Canaanite women in today's gospel. She'll tell you all about faith—faith that comes with courage and determination. She's was not one of the chosen people, she was an outsider that the insiders didn't want around. She was a woman with a child she needed to help. Life for her was neither simple nor easy. She is all of us. She is the one for whom Jesus came. She is the one who knows her need of God. It is her faith that this Gospel puts before us. She has become our teacher.

Life may be difficult. Yes, it is. But we are all in this together. AND everyone is deserving of God's love and mercy. This is an invitation into a community of friends who with love and compassion, a kind of knowing and sharing, welcome everyone into one family. We are, afterall, all in this together.

AMEN.