

The First Congregational Church of Plainfield

September 6, 2015

Sermon Title: "God's Love for All"

Psalm 146

Joyce Shippee.

Easy-to-Read Version (ERV)

Praise the LORD! My soul, praise the LORD!

<sup>2</sup> I will praise the LORD all my life.

I will sing praises to him as long as I live.

<sup>3</sup> Don't depend on your leaders for help.

Don't depend on people, because they cannot save you.

<sup>4</sup> People die and are buried. Then all their plans to help are gone.

<sup>5</sup> It is a great blessing for people to have the God of Jacob to help them.

They depend on the LORD their God. <sup>6</sup> He made heaven and earth.

He made the sea and everything in it.

He can be trusted to do what he says.

<sup>7</sup> He does what is right for those who have been hurt.

He gives food to the hungry. The LORD frees people locked up in prison.

<sup>8</sup> The LORD makes the blind see again.

The LORD helps those who are in trouble.

The LORD loves those who do right.

<sup>9</sup> The LORD protects strangers in our country.

He cares for widows and orphans, but he destroys the wicked.

<sup>10</sup> The LORD will rule forever! Zion, your God will rule forever and ever!

James 2:1-17

Page 1101

Deacon Rebecca

(NRSV)

### **Warning against Partiality**

2 My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? <sup>2</sup> For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes

comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, <sup>3</sup> and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet,"

<sup>4</sup> have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? <sup>5</sup> Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor

in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? <sup>6</sup> But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who

oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? <sup>7</sup> Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

<sup>8</sup> You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." <sup>9</sup> But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. <sup>10</sup> For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. <sup>11</sup> For the one who said, "You shall not commit adultery," also said, "You shall not murder." Now if you do not commit adultery but if you murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. <sup>12</sup> So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. <sup>13</sup> For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.

### **Faith without Works Is Dead**

<sup>14</sup> What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? <sup>15</sup> If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, <sup>16</sup> and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? <sup>17</sup> So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

### **Mark 7:24-37**

**Pastor Terry Hood**

**New Living Translation (NLT)**

<sup>24</sup> Then Jesus left Galilee and went north to the region of Tyre. He didn't want anyone to know which house he was staying in, but he couldn't keep it a secret.

<sup>25</sup> Right away a woman who had heard about him came and fell at his feet. Her little girl was possessed by an evil spirit, <sup>26</sup> and she begged him to cast out the demon from her daughter.

Since she was a Gentile, born in Syrian Phoenicia, <sup>27</sup> Jesus told her, "First I should feed the children—my own family, the Jews. It isn't right to take food from the children and throw it to the dogs."

<sup>28</sup> She replied, "That's true, Lord, but even the dogs under the table are allowed to eat the scraps from the children's plates."

<sup>29</sup> "Good answer!" he said. "Now go home, for the demon has left your daughter."

<sup>30</sup> And when she arrived home, she found her little girl lying quietly in bed, and the demon was gone.

<sup>31</sup> Jesus left Tyre and went up to Sidon before going back to the Sea of Galilee and the region of the Ten Towns. <sup>32</sup> A deaf man with a speech impediment was brought to him, and the people begged Jesus to lay his hands on the man to heal him.

<sup>33</sup> Jesus led him away from the crowd so they could be alone. He put his fingers into the man's ears. Then, spitting on his own fingers, he touched the man's tongue.

<sup>34</sup> Looking up to heaven, he sighed and said, "Ephphatha," which means, "Be opened!"

<sup>35</sup> Instantly the man could hear perfectly, and his tongue was freed so he could speak plainly!

<sup>36</sup> Jesus told the crowd not to tell anyone, but the more he told them not to, the more they spread the news. <sup>37</sup> They were completely amazed and said again and again, "Everything he does is wonderful. He even makes the deaf to hear and gives speech to those who cannot speak."

Message: "God's Love for All"

What's happening here? Maybe, as I read to you today the harsh words that Jesus used toward the Syrophenician woman and her sick daughter, you felt uncomfortable. How could Jesus say that to her? How does this story fit? There are many angles that have been taken toward this story. Some say it's a test of her faith to see if she will say what's in her heart. Others suggest that Jesus had a moment of just being human and rude to her. Of course, we cannot say for certain what was Jesus' intent; we only know what Mark and also Matthew wrote. My thoughts don't agree with either of the two theories that I mentioned. I have prayed on this and the same thought continues to surge to the front of my mind. But before we go into that, let's just look at the rest of the context that Mark tells us about before this story.

In the first chapter of Mark, Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law and many others, and then Jesus touches and heals a leper - a man repulsive to society and an outcast. In chapter two, Jesus forgives the sins of and heals the paralyzed man that was lowered through the roof of the house. If you remember that story, they couldn't get in the door because of the crowd that had gathered so (thinking outside the box), they lift off a segment of the roof and lower the man down in front of Jesus. It must have been quite a sight. As we continue in chapter two, Jesus decides to call a despised tax collector to be one of his disciples. And in chapter 5, Jesus tames and heals the crazed man that was possessed in the graveyard, heals the woman that had hemorrhaged for twelve years (she touched the edge of his garment), and raises a young girl from the dead. Chapter six tells of Jesus feeding five thousand out of only a couple of loaves of bread and two fish, walking on water to the disciples boat in the storm, healing the sick all around the area of Gennesaret and as we discussed last week, Jesus shocks the Jewish leaders and those gathered by telling them that it is not what you eat or how clean your hands are that defiles a person but it is the evil that comes out of their hearts that makes them unclean.

So now we come to this Syrophenician woman. Some may think that because she comes to him the way she did that she was poor especially because of the comment Jesus makes about "dogs." You may think that she was destitute but that, most likely, wasn't the case. The area of Tyre was quite different than Galilee, there were many wealthy Syrians and Phoenicians and as a group, they had not been the kindest toward the Jewish population. But would Jesus discriminate that way? Based on all that I have summarized in the Mark story thus far, Jesus has made it abundantly clear that it did not matter whether you were a Jew or a non-Jew, a leper or a tax collector, a man or a woman, what mattered to Jesus was the intent of the heart.

My theory is that Jesus is making a point to the disciples and the group gathered around him. He speaks in words that they would have expected from their culture. They were accustomed to discriminating, to judging some worthy and some unworthy of respect, of love. Jesus' statement to her must have taken them back for a moment and confused them. I imagine the disciples were thinking, "Yeah stupid woman, leave him alone, he just described you as a dog." Then in the same moment, I imagine they thought, "Wait a minute, he has been telling us to love everyone, to heal and bless everyone, to turn the other cheek! What's happening here?" Jesus' refusal and demeaning comment is completely out of character with all that he had been and all that he had taught. Then I see the twinkle in Jesus' eye as he looks back at the woman and gives her the good news, "Good answer!" he says, "Now go home, for the demon has left your daughter." Now that sounds more like Jesus.

I believe that he wanted them to recognize the absurdity of their long held attitudes. I believe that he wanted them to hear how nasty it sounds when we decide that another child of God is unworthy of God's love. It's as if he is reminding them of how he fed the five thousand and still had leftovers that were not to be wasted. So does God's love spill over and there is more than enough to give to all. All are worthy of God's love.

As I have taught before, it is important not to take just one part of the bible out of context with the whole. So I offer to you some of the places that affirm God's love for all.

First, Jesus' call of the Great Commission from the Gospel of Matthew, "And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'"<sup>ii</sup>

Second, the Apostle Peter writes, "The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance."<sup>iii</sup>

Third, Apostle Paul writes, "Do you imagine, whoever you are, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you despise the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not realize that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath, when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. For he will repay according to each one's deeds: to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; while for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality."<sup>iiii</sup>

Deep down, we have all been guilty at one time or another of judging someone as "unworthy;" unworthy of our presence, unworthy of our energy, unworthy of our respect, unworthy of our time, unworthy of our love. This is not meant to be a judgment or a condemnation but a reality that we must recognize within our human nature. We are called to be Jesus to everyone and to see Jesus in everyone; we are summoned to touch each life which is brought into our God-given path. Sometimes love comes when we allow someone to stand on their own two feet and be responsible for their choices - I remember the time Jesus asked the man that had been paralyzed for 38 years, "do you want to be made well?"<sup>iv</sup> Strange question, you may think, but the man had a choice; not everyone really wants to be made well. Being whole and healthy requires that new responsibilities be accepted for oneself and for others. Sometimes love comes with just being present for another; that is offering them the ministry of your presence and not trying to fix them. I think of the times Jesus spent just being with his disciples, walking with them, picking grains of wheat, breaking bread with them and praying with them.

Sometimes love comes with standing firm and speaking God's truth with the intent of softening hard hearts like the story of Jesus reprimanding the Jewish leaders and ending with the words of how he longed to gather them under his wing like a hen gathers her brood but they were not willing. Sometimes love comes in offering to another our time, our energy, our financial help, even opening up our home. Think of the energy Jesus expended throughout his ministry in loving and healing and feeding people only to be left alone when he needed them most. Love comes in many ways and only God knows our true intentions.

And of course, I would be remiss to not remind you of the all-encompassing bible verse that wraps everything together and that is Jesus declaration of the greatest commandments, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." <sup>v</sup>

God's love is for all.

Let's think about that.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Matthew 28:18-20 NRSV

<sup>ii</sup> 2 Peter 3:9 NRSV

<sup>iii</sup> Romans 2:3-11 NRSV

<sup>iv</sup> John 5:6b NRSV

<sup>v</sup> Mark 12:28-31 NRSV