

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk
(Delivered on Sunday, September 6, 2015)

Text: Mark 7:24-37 (The Message)

From there Jesus set out for the vicinity of Tyre. He entered a house there where he didn't think he would be found, but he couldn't escape notice. He was barely inside when a woman who had a disturbed daughter heard where he was. She came and knelt at his feet, begging for help. The woman was Greek, Syro-Phoenician by birth. She asked him to cure her daughter.

He said, "Stand in line and take your turn. The children get fed first. If there's any left over, the dogs get it."

She said, "Of course, Master. But don't dogs under the table get scraps dropped by the children?"

Jesus was impressed. "You're right! On your way! Your daughter is no longer disturbed. The demonic affliction is gone." She went home and found her daughter relaxed on the bed, the torment gone for good.

Then he left the region of Tyre, went through Sidon back to Galilee Lake and over to the district of the Ten Towns. Some people brought a man who could neither hear nor speak and asked Jesus to lay a healing hand on him. He took the man off by himself, put his fingers in the man's ears and some spit on the man's tongue. Then Jesus looked up in prayer, groaned mightily, and commanded, "Ephphatha!—

Open up!" And it happened. The man's hearing was clear and his speech plain—just like that.

Jesus urged them to keep it quiet, but they talked it up all the more, beside themselves with excitement. "He's done it all and done it well. He gives hearing to the deaf, speech to the speechless."

Reflections by Pastor Donald: **"Growing AS Christ in an 'ism World"**

LET'S just get this out of the way right off the bat, shall we. Are you a racist?

Shocking, isn't it? To have somebody, especially your pastor, just come right out and dare to ask such a question. And what, I wonder is your first response? Is it like mine when confronted with such a direct question? 'Of course not!' And what is your second response? "Well, maybe when I'm driving..."

The questions of racism and tribalism and all those 'isms that divide us as peoples of this world is a tough one and one we obviously would rather avoid if we could. But I believe that it is only in confronting the ways in which we view each other and those we meet, hear about and consider in the world, with absolute honesty, that we have any hope of dealing not only with our own views but also with those that exist around the world. Then and only then I believe can we hope to bring about any piece of the peaceable kin-dom God desires for us all.

Since you may already be in a bit of a shock, let me continue by telling you that I came across a radical idea while I was studying the scriptures for today. Do you want to hear it? Are you ready for it?

It's a question David R. Henson proposed in an article he wrote for Patheos back in 2012, where he asked, "Was Jesus a racist?" Say whaaaaat???

"This might be an uncomfortable question for Christians to ask," he goes on (ya think?!) but, given this week's lectionary text, I think it's one we must ask. And we must ask it unvarnished."

And just like my and probably your first response to the question are you a racist was "of course not" so Mr. Henson says it is when we think about Jesus in such a context. "But Jesus' exchange with the Syrophoenician woman seems to tell a different story," he writes. "In it, Jesus calls the woman, who was desperate for a miracle for her child, a dog, a dehumanizing ethnic slur common at

the time. No matter what theological tap dance we might create to avoid this uncomfortable truth, eventually, we have to face this stark truth.”

Which brings me to my central point for today, what if Jesus had to grow in his understanding of life and God and who he was in much the same way we do?

But what’s going on here, Pastor? Is this shock central? Doesn’t that go against his divinity, his intrinsic “knowingness,” his “GOD-ness?”

“Perhaps part of the difficulty of this passage,” Mr. Henson writes, “is that we want Jesus to be colorblind. We want Jesus to be colorblind because that’s what many of us want to be or think we should be... [But] in truth, at least in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is anything but colorblind. In fact, rather than being part of the solution to ethnic prejudice, Jesus seems to be very much part of the problem...”

Wow. Have you ever thought of Jesus as THAT human? Is this a case of humanity trumping divinity? I don’t think so. At least not if you see Christ’s divinity as one with his humanity as he calls us to integrate the highest parts of ourselves into that which we were created to be out of clay and spit in this very incarnation.

To be honest, I had never quite thought of Jesus in this way, as one who grew and developed in thought and consciousness as we ourselves do, albeit to a much higher degree and with the intimate connection to the Godhead that eludes our grasp.

But how else are we to take the exhortation of Jesus in John’s gospel as He tells his disciples and all of us to come afterwards that, “the person who trusts me will not only do what I’m doing but even greater things?”

Jesus, the ultimate way-shower, the One who became like us to show us the spark of divinity within each one of us, also needed to show us the ways in which we grow and expand and break the bonds of our culture, our human heritage and our tenacious ties to this world.

“This, I think, is the great lesson of the Syrophenician woman,” Mr. Henson writes in an updated version of his article called, “Jesus Was Not Colorblind.” It teaches us the dynamics of racism, of how even the best of humanity — the Incarnation himself — can get caught up in systems of oppression, in a culture of supremacy. As a good Jew, Jesus would have been reared to give thanks daily that he was born a Jew, not a Gentile, a man and not a woman. Jesus could not help but become entangled by such a sexist and racist snare. Jesus, given his embedded culture, could not be colorblind. And neither can we.”

To me, this is cause for great hope.

How’s that??? Come again???

Seeing Jesus in the midst of his extraordinary context, far more embedded in a culture of racism, sexism and tribalism than even I was in the hills of Virginia, I recognize the possibility of change in my own heart and know that God is surely at work in me and still speaking even as She spoke to Jesus and opened His eyes all those centuries ago in his extraordinarily closed off context.

In fact, the very word Jesus utters to bring healing to the deaf man, “Ephphatha” (EFF-uh-thuh) in the second part of today’s story means to be opened. Perhaps we’re seeing even here that Jesus is calling all of us to be opened and to hear from within as well as from without as he had just been opened to the Syrophenician woman, allowing her words to open him to the wide embrace of God that He might break yet another boundary and allow healing to take place in the microcosm of the community in which he found himself and the macrocosm of God’s infinite and timeless universe where being open to all of God’s creation brings peace and absolute fulfillment.

“...if we are to take Mark’s narrative seriously, never mind the incarnational and creedal affirmation that Jesus is fully human as well as fully divine, then perhaps we should not be surprised

to see a development in Jesus' own recognition of God's vision for the world," Dr. David Lose writes in his article, "What the Syrochenean Woman Teaches." "After all, the profoundly expansive notion of a kingdom that included everyone – no exceptions! – was completely and totally novel. (And still is!)"

"If so," he continues "– if we can imagine that this woman didn't simply pass a clever test but instead, and as Jesus himself says, demonstrated profound faith – then we might acknowledge that this brave mother actually taught the Teacher and, therefore, might have some things to teach us as well."

And one of these things as Dr. Lose sees it, is "the power of the stranger. Newcomers, strangers, people who are different from us – they stretch our perspective and teach us things about themselves, about the world, and about us. But only if we will listen."

Have you ever had that experience? Waiting in line at the grocery store or perhaps pumping gas at a crowded filling station? And someone next to you in line or at the pump across the way catches your eye or just speaks to you out of the blue? Or maybe it's the person you're standing beside while waiting to cross the street or the homeless woman who sits alone at the corner of a sidewalk.

Granted, sometimes the things strangers say to you are filled with hatred or disgust and things you may not want to hear, but even those things can open us up to our own inner feelings and prejudices.

I think God surrounds us many, many times throughout our lives with strangers, some might even say angels unawares, who are there to teach us and help us and lift us or prod us with a thought or an opportunity; but only if we are open, only if we listen and accept what and who God has put before us in any given moment and what they have to say or teach us.

"There is really no story like this in the Bible" Karoline Lewis, an associate professor of preaching at Luther Seminary writes as she considers our text for today. "Well, the one exception might be Moses getting God to change God's mind. But this woman does more than get Jesus to change his mind -- she rocks Jesus' world. She gets Jesus to admit for what and whom his ministry is all about. She gets Jesus to see God for what and who God truly is."

Just as we looked fully and deeply at ourselves in the mirror last week, God today is calling us to listen fully and deeply to the people that come in and out of our lives and to examine our attitudes towards them. Christ calls us to gaze down into the dark of our deceptive prejudices just as he did and to open ourselves to the enlightenment God brings.

In the United Church of Christ we take as our motto, "That They May All Be One," the words of Christ from John 10. But how often do we take concrete steps within ourselves and within our church to consciously include all of God's children, recognizing the stumbling blocks and asking for forgiveness even as we move forward to foster unity and break down the barriers of racism, classicism and tribalism that divide us all?

Today, we join in solidarity with churches around the world in accepting the invitation from the American Methodist Episcopal or AME churches to recognize this Sunday as a day of "Confession, Repentance and Commitment to End Racism."

As a symbol of this solidarity, would you please stand if you are so inclined, and join in this adapted litany by Bishop Adam J. Richardson, Jr. called "After the Vigils, Vigilance!"

Leader: "Prayers can't be answered unless they are prayed," so the poet reminds us, and so we have honored the dead in vigils of remembrance, emotional prayers, heartfelt tributes, and appropriate words spoken by public officials, but something must follow the prayer meeting --
ACTION.

People: Vigilance follows the Vigil!

Leader: "Tragedies are common place," so writes the composer - and the choirs sing, and following the tragedies, vigils were called in New Town, Aurora, New York, Sanford, Jacksonville, Charleston, St. Louis, Ferguson, Baltimore, Los Angeles, Atlanta, Washington, DC and in sympathizing places around the world, for the senseless deaths. That's why something must follow the prayer meeting -- ACTION.

People: Vigilance follows the Vigil!

Leader: "Shall we pray?" some sincere soul will rhetorically ask for very good reasons. Prayer centers the spirit, calms the mind, sharpens the thought, makes the vision keen, quickens the will, and throws a laser beam on a problem. At the end of the Vigil, when the "Amen" has been said and sung, something must follow the prayer meeting -- ACTION.

People: Vigilance follows the Vigil!

Leader: "Pray as if everything depended on God; act as if everything depended on us," so says the thoughtful theologian. It is putting feet to our faith, power to our prayers, urgency to the present concern, momentum to the Movement. "I received no answer" says Frederick Douglass, "until I prayed with my legs." Something must follow the prayer meeting -- ACTION.

People: Vigilance follows the Vigil!

Leader: Vigil is the starting place, not only to feel God's Grace, but to do God's Will -- taking action against injustice. The sequence begins in theological reflection, the upward glance, deference to the Creator; marching orders for a parade route out of bondage to a Promised Land. Next steps include consensus-building for political, social, economic solutions. Something must follow the prayer meeting -- ACTION.

People: Vigilance follows the Vigil!

Leader: After the Vigil, Vigilance, to be daily examples of love, peace, faith, hope, maturity, responsibility and excellence, so that succeeding generations will be motivated to become what they see in us -- after we have prayed, not merely inspired by what we say. Something follows the prayer meeting -- ACTION.

People: Vigilance follows the Vigil!

Leader: After the Vigil, Vigilance, for legislative cures, legal remedies, exercising the franchise to vote in every election, to hold lawmakers and public officials accountable. Something must follow the prayer meeting -- ACTION.

People: Vigilance follows the Vigil!

Leader: After the Vigil, Vigilance, against racism. Race is unavoidable; racism is a decision and optional. Hate is a horrible heritage; injustice is a terrible legacy, intolerance is a hindrance to freedom; indifference is the precursor to decay, apathy is the door to destruction; hopelessness is a path to collective misery.

People: Prophetic ministry beckons us -- again -- to the Press, to the Polls, to the Precincts, to the Markets, to the School Boards, to the Statehouse, to the Capitol, to the White House -- to express our Pain, to have our voices heard, our ideas considered, our demands met. Vigilance follows the Vigil!

Amen!