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June 12, 2022

Mark 7: 24 - 37

Good morning everyone. It is such a joy and a privilege it is to be with you this morning and to have the chance to preach and worship with you. I am so grateful to be with your community and to see each of you. I also want to say something about the Scripture I just read. Of all the stories we hear about Jesus in the Bible, this is not one that's well known. And there's a reason for that. It's odd, a bit disturbing, and it doesn't necessarily add up to what we know about who Jesus is. I wouldn't be surprised if all of you are shocked that this is the text I chose to preach on my first time leading worship with you. But I want you to know that I've chosen this text for a particular purpose because I think there's a lot more to it than meets the eye if we only take it apart a little bit. This text gives us a much larger picture of who Jesus was as a human being and who we are called to be too. So to break down this Scripture, I'm going to tell you a story from my life that sheds light on this text and it's my hope that by sharing it with you, you'll see the text differently and get to know me on a deeper level too. How does that sound to all of you? Good? Alright.

So first things first, I want to tell you a little bit about how I grew up. I was born and raised in a suburb of Central Pennsylvania called Mechanicsburg with my older sister and my younger brother...That makes me a middle child, and if you're familiar with any middle child stereotypes, I'm pretty sure they're all true for me. My brother, sister and I are really close in age...My sister is two years older than me and my brother is two years younger, so we did a lot of things together when we were kids, but we're also super different which meant we also were almost always at each other's throats about something. Growing up, my family went to a church in downtown Harrisburg called Pine Street Presbyterian Church. It's this gorgeous gothic style cathedral right across the street from the State capital building and it was also just down the street from the train station where my dad worked as a power director for Amtrak. A really distinct memory I have of going to Pine Street was that when I was about 12 or 13, it was the first time I was old enough to really understand what was going on when my church hired a new pastor. I remember it was really exciting because the pastor we were hiring was brought on specifically to develop our church's youth program was mostly out of commission for several years before he was hired. Being a middle school student, it felt pretty special that someone was being hired specifically for kids my age and beyond.

Even though I was excited at first, things changed a bit after our new pastor arrived. When I was younger, if I wasn't at school or church, I could pretty much always be found in dance rehearsals and I dreamed of becoming a professional ballet dancer. By the time I was 12 years old, I was dancing about 26 hours a week, so I didn't have much time for any other activities. So when this new pastor was scheduling weekly youth groups and put Middle School Youth on Wednesday nights, I knew right away that I couldn't go because I had rehearsal on Wednesdays. I was disappointed, but to tell you the truth, I was pretty used to that. I had one night off of dance during the week, so with that schedule, I'd already quit Girl Scouts, play dates, and just about everything else, so it wasn't the end of the world for me. It was, however, NOT okay with my mother. After church one Sunday, she took our pastor aside and she asked him to change the night of youth group so I could go. Understandably, he said no...but he agreed to let me come to High School Youth Group on Sunday nights instead. On one of my only nights off. With my older sister and all the other high school students that I wasn't really friends with. This arrangement

definitely pleased my mom...but can you guess how I felt about all of it? I was not a happy teenager to say the very least. And I made sure everyone knew that.

Let me paint a picture for you of what my year as a middle school student at high school youth group looked like...And I have to say, all these years later, I'm still embarrassed about this, so I definitely welcome any laughter you can muster to help me through. High School youth group would start off with a group dinner in our church's fellowship hall. Usually, my family walked in when other people were already there and gathered around a table and rather than joining everyone and taking part in the group's conversation, I would sit at another table by myself and made it clear with my body language and one word responses to people that I didn't really want to talk to anyone. After dinner, we'd play a game all together in a gym across the street from our church. I tried just about every maneuver imaginable to avoid playing the game...I hid in the bathroom, refused to move from the benches in the gym, and found ways around the rules for whatever game we were playing, which ensured that when I played, it was less fun for everyone else. Afterwards, when it was time for our lesson, I would sit in the back of the room, cross my arms, and either refuse to pay attention or just make my general dissatisfaction known by my attitude. All in all, I did everything in my power to passive aggressively protest my being there because it felt like the one thing I could control about my situation. I didn't have a choice in coming...my mom made me even though I didn't want to. But do you know who I was angry at about all this? It would make some sense if I was angry at my mom, but it wasn't her. I decided I was angry at our new pastor. Alex. Our church was Alex's first ordained call, he was 28 years old, and he and his wife Courtney put a ton of time and effort into our youth groups. And in my teenage brain, it was their fault that I was spending my Sunday night at church with a group of kids that I didn't think liked me or wanted to be my friend. And so I made sure that we wouldn't become friends. I chose to completely dismiss an entire group of people from my church because I was angry and that anger made it impossible for me to see the situation as it actually was. Being thirteen felt so confusing and in my mind, youth group was the source of all my problems.

You can probably guess by the fact that I am standing here preaching a sermon that this was not the end of the story for me. I continued to go to high school youth group for all of eighth grade mostly against my will...but by the summer between eighth and ninth grade, I was really surprised when something in me started to shift. I noticed that I was starting to look forward to going to youth group, like genuinely, I wasn't just forcing myself to enjoy it. I slowly migrated from sitting at a separate table at dinner to joining everyone else and found that eating meals together was a lot of fun...the games didn't grow on me as much, but I learned to protest a lot less and I started to like them too. But what I loved the most was our lessons. We would delve into scripture and hear stories that helped me make sense of all stuff in the Bible that had previously been incomprehensible to me. People started sharing a lot about their lives and what they were going through and I felt closer to people I'd dismissed just a year before. And I actually started to feel like I had something to contribute. Like I mattered, and I was smart, and the group wanted me there. I'd never felt like that before...Not at school, not even at dance. If my vision had been obscured before, it was like the scales were falling from my eyes. And slowly, I saw that the pastor I thought I hated really cared about me. And that changed my life.

So how did it happen, that I went from believing this pastor was the source of all my problems, from completely dismissing him and our entire group, to feeling the deepest sense of belonging I'd ever felt with those same people? This is where our Scripture becomes really important so let's walk through this text.

To really understand this Scripture, it's helpful to know what's going on beforehand. Jesus has been traveling all over this region where he is from called Galilee, and it's not a wealthy place. It's a poor, farming type community where there's a lot of need and desperation. So Jesus is preaching and teaching people and everyone seems to want to talk to him and be healed by him. Every time he tries to get away from people, crowds seem to find him and he's starting to get worn out. On top of all of that, just before going to Tyre where our scripture takes place, Jesus is confronted by Jewish religious officials about the Jewish laws dealing with the cleanliness of food and utensils. The officials are upset that Jesus and the disciples aren't abiding by those laws, and Jesus tells them that those laws mean nothing if people are not transforming their actions and acting out of love because sin and evil don't come from unclean food, they come from the human heart. So Jesus tells people to transform their hearts, declares that all foods are clean, and that's when he heads off to Phoenicia where Tyre is located.

What you need to know about Tyre is that it's in a region where there are only Gentiles...that means there are no Jewish people. But beyond that, Tyre is also a port city right on the Mediterranean Sea so a lot of commerce came into Tyre from other places. That meant that Tyre was not only a sprawling Metropolis, but a place where really wealthy people lived. It was the sort of place where people came to indulge and have a good time...some scholars call it the Las Vegas of the ancient world. All of this is to say that Tyre was about as different as you could get from the middle of nowhere, poor communities Jesus was used to serving around Galilee. While Jesus was probably well-known by the Jewish peasants that lived around that region, most people in Tyre likely saw him and assumed he was a beggar on the streets. That made it the kind of place Jesus could go and be sure that no crowds followed him. And yet, a woman still approaches Jesus and asks him to heal her daughter.

Jesus is exhausted and trying to get away from people, so it's understandable that he might be resistant to helping someone. But what we see in our scripture is not just resistance. Jesus is blatantly rude to this woman. Jesus tells her to let the children, meaning the Jewish people, be fed first "for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Simply put, Jesus tells this woman she is a dog. This is a major insult, and what Jesus is saying is that the blessings God offers need to go to the Jewish people first, then the Gentiles can fight over what's left. This is not the Jesus any of us are used to seeing...The Jesus who loves the downtrodden and the suffering. This is a Jesus who insults and dismisses another person. But we know that Jesus does choose to heal this woman's daughter. So what made Jesus change his mind? At a glance, it might seem that a witty comeback opens Jesus's eyes. The Syrophenician woman goes along with Jesus's insult, agreeing that she is a dog by saying, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." And Jesus seems so taken by this humility that he heals her daughter. But that still leaves us with an important question: Why did Jesus act this way in the first place? How could a person who was just saying that the human heart is the source of evil and so we have to transform our hearts to live in a way that reflects love, how did that same person dismiss someone so blatantly?

Here's what I think was going on here: Jesus comes into this city—It's one of the wealthiest cities in the ancient world, probably unlike any place he'd ever seen before. Growing up in Nazareth and the region of Galilee, Jesus saw enormous poverty, inequality, and pain. You see, when large cities like Tyre and like the Decapolis that shows up later in the text started to emerge, it was the farming regions like Galilee that had to provide those cities with food, while the peasants who were doing the farming went hungry. So in Tyre, where Jesus went to get away from people, he was surrounded by people with more money than they knew what to do with and they probably treated him like he was nothing. Except this one

woman. We don't know anything about her apart from the fact that she's not Jewish, she lives surrounded by wealth, and she needs Jesus's help. So when she acknowledges Jesus, he does something that is so human...he takes her and puts her into a box. Without knowing anything other than where she's from, he concludes that this woman falls into the category of people who are the reason his people—the poor and downtrodden—are suffering. He dismisses her because when he looks at her, she symbolizes everything that causes his people to suffer. If you believe that someone is the cause of your suffering, are you going to help them? Are you going to be generous to them? Probably not. But then she does something quite amazing. When Jesus calls her a dog, he essentially says to her, "You are not worth helping." And by owning that insult, she goes there with him and tells him, "I may be a dog, but I need your help." So when the Syrophenician woman concedes with what Jesus is saying, her suffering becomes clear and it forces Jesus to acknowledge her humanity. In that moment, Jesus sees that she is no different than his family and friends who are suffering too. And suddenly he is willing to acknowledge her and see her. I feel like every time I read this Scripture, I can't help but feel like this woman forces Jesus to remember the whole point of his ministry—She confronts him with the lesson that he just taught the Jewish officials...that we need to transform our hearts. And we can see that this exchange with the Syrophenician woman changes Jesus because right after healing her daughter, he goes off to the Decapolis which was a group of ten Greek cities on the eastern front of the Roman Empire...another place where there are no Jewish people, and he heals a man who cannot hear or speak.

So to summarize, Jesus comes to this very wealthy city. The people there don't care about him except this one woman who wants him to heal her daughter, and he ignores her. He places her in a category of people who are not worthy of his attention and says, "I don't need to deal with you." He's treating her like the people of Tyre have treated him. And then, she turns it around. She forces him to acknowledge her humanity and suffering and she changes Jesus's perception of her from a dog into a human being. When I shared the story from my life earlier, I raised a question: How did I go from believing my pastor was the source of all my problems, from dismissing him and an entire group of people, to feeling the deepest sense of belonging I'd ever felt with those same people? The truth is, my pastor saw me and acknowledged me. He could see the way that I was being consumed by anger and that my suffering was causing these huge blind spots that led me to put all my anger on him. And he didn't turn away from my suffering. He looked right at it and acknowledged me, even when I was being unbearable and totally dismissive. He didn't flinch and he didn't give up on me either. To be seen like that, especially when I had been so unbearable for a year, that transformed my heart. I can honestly say to be seen like that changes a person and I know because I experienced it right there in my church at youth group and I've never been the same since. And the role that pastor I thought I hated, has played in my life since then as my pastor has fundamentally changed the entire trajectory of my life.

I think that this is what our scripture for today is all about at its core. It is about how every single person needs and deserves to be seen and acknowledged for who they are, not the boxes we put them or the categories we create for people that make it so easy for us to dismiss one another. Truly seeing people forces us to realize that we are all the same. And when you look at another person and see their humanity, the blind spots that obscure our view and cause us to see people only in terms of the categories we've been taught to place people in start to fade away.

What's tricky about these blind spots is that they're not something we're always conscious of. We're taught and even rewarded for putting people into categories. You see, in our world, we are taught to value certain people and to ignore others. Our world teaches us to put people into boxes based on what

they can do for us and there are certain people who are more worthy of our attention than others. What I actually love about this Scripture is it tells that we ALL have blind spots. Even Jesus is not totally immune from this way of seeing people. But when confronted with the truth of his own blindness, Jesus opens his eyes and heart so he can choose a different reality going forward. So often, we talk about Jesus being perfect, flawless, and here, what this tells us is that Jesus had to undergo certain transformations in his own life and that you have to undergo those transformations as well. I need to do it too. And the way that we start to move past these blind spots is by looking beyond the categories we put other people in...and instead, look at people and truly see them. When we look at people rather than beyond them, that's when our blind spots start to fade away. Because whether a person is a living on the street and struggling with drug addiction or is the CEO of a fortune 500 company, every single person has a story that will bring you to your knees.

What I want you to know is that as your pastor, I am going to make mistakes. You are going to see me fail. I told you a story about a huge blind spot I had when I was thirteen years old and a lot of time has passed since then, but I still have a lot of blind spots. I won't pretend that I get it right all the time...I don't even think I get it right most of the time. But what I need you to know is this: I am not here to be right. I am here to get it right. I may have blind spots, but every single day, I will strive to be a person and a pastor who does not place you into a box or a category. I will not claim to know what your life experiences are based on incomplete data like what you look like, where you're from, how much money you make, how much education you have, or the choices you've made in your past. When I look at you, I will strive always to see the face of God in you and to see that you are a beloved child of God. And I'm going to ask that you do the same for me. When you look at me, I want you to see past all the categories and boxes I fall into. My bio told you a lot about where I've been, where I went to school, things like that, but there's a lot more to me and I know there's a lot more to you too. As your pastor, I will do everything in my power to truly see you. Will you do the same for me and for other people too?

I want to say one final thing before I close. Right now, seeing each other and acknowledging our common humanity is more important than ever. Over the past few weeks and quite honestly, for years at this point, there have been horrific acts of violence in our world in Buffalo, New York. In Uvalde, Texas. At the Mexican border, in Berlin, in Ukraine. In Syria. The list goes on. In the wake of mass shootings, racially motivated violence, actions that completely undermine human dignity, I think many people have stepped back and said, "What is going on...Why is this happening?" And I know that my first reaction when I see all these things happen is fear, anger, and searching for any ideology that will offer me some sense of control or safety so I can protect myself and the people I love from the kind of fate I cannot bear. But then I think about this Scripture, and I think what Jesus teaches us is that the most powerful weapon we possess is the ability to transform our hearts to reflect God's love. I believe that we can make a difference in this world through the love in our hearts. When you look at people and truly see them, and you allow them to see you too. To see the love in your heart. And that means they have to see you as a human being and it's a lot harder to put a bullet inside of somebody when you have to look at them as a human being that is exactly like you. When you see each other as being exactly the same. It's a hard thing to live up to Jesus's expectations for our lives, even Jesus couldn't do it all the time, but I do believe, and I have seen again and again throughout history, that when you invest in love, when you invest in really seeing people, at first it is really challenging but in the long run, it does win. And so I hope that you will look past the categories and boxes we've been taught to put people in and look at people in the eyes so that those blind spots start to fall away. I hope you will look at people and

show them the love in your heart, allowing your heart to be transformed by the humanity of the people around you. Because that love really can make a difference in this world when we see others and allow ourselves to be seen. I hope you believe that to be true because I certainly do. Amen.