

A Sermon for 16th Sunday after Pentecost

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Rev. Barbara Bond

New Life Episcopal Church, Uniontown, OH

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[Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost – The Episcopal Church](#)

Mark 7:24-37

Holy Conversation

Today's Gospel tells two very different incidents, events from Jesus' ministry that show an evolution of his thinking. Did God assign him to minister ONLY to the Jews? Jesus seems to imply that as his understanding, when a Gentile woman asks him for healing and compassion for her young daughter. The girl is tormented by a demon, and the mother begs for Jesus' intervention.

I don't think this is one of Jesus' more compassionate responses. He essentially calls the woman a dog who is not worthy of his attention. But she is not dissuaded. She tells him that she'll take the crumbs, whatever is left, if it will heal her daughter. Jesus is impressed, and he heals her daughter. And apparently after that, Jesus widens his ministry to include Gentiles and whoever needs him. In the very next scene he heals a man of deafness, with no inquiry if the man is Jewish. Perhaps the message to us is to be bold: ask for what we need and trust that God will hear us.

This scene with the Gentile woman is a background story to one of our old prayers, sometimes called The Prayer of Humble Access. You may remember it from our communion services in the old days, before the 1979 Prayer Book. Although the prayer has some beautiful poetry in it, I do take exception to the opening sentences. Perhaps this is familiar to you. It was said just before receiving communion.

We do not presume to come to this thy Table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table.

Unworthy? Who says we are unworthy? God created us in God's own image, and God don't make no junk. All of creation, including us, is made by God and it is all good – God said so. It is very good. Where does this unworthiness idea come from?

Shame and guilt were, unfortunately, emphasized in the church in medieval times, and the people were not allowed to receive communion at all, or perhaps once a year at Easter. What we now regard as sustenance for our souls was formerly regarded as too good for us. Thus this prayer survives as a monument to an earlier theology of unworthiness, which I trust most of us would not agree with anymore, if we ever did. And essentially, Jesus agreed that the Gentile woman made exactly this point, and he agreed with her.

I remember attending a clergy gathering about 20 years ago, where we had liturgy every day. In the Morning Prayer liturgy, one priest took exception to the idea of unworthiness and told us to omit it from the General Thanksgiving. You know this prayer: it begins, **Almighty God, Father of all mercies, we your unworthy servants give you humble thanks...** Whoops. There it is again: a leftover from medieval theology which we intone, probably without thinking about it.

I wonder how much of our liturgy is said in rote phrases, from memory, without much thought? The Lord's Prayer, one of our dearest and most beloved prayers, contains a confession right in the middle. Do you hear it as it goes by? **Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.** Or, in the modern translation, **Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.** This is a very significant phrase, and I strive to hear it, really hear it, every time I say it, and ask for forgiveness for my own failings. We all commit trespasses, and in our relationship with God, we want to be open and tell the truth. We do trespass, but it does not make us unworthy to be in communion with God.

I try to pay attention, for you, for everything in our liturgies, including prayers and hymn texts. Theology is always evolving, and those who oversee our prayer book and hymnals are constantly reviewing the words. The old Hymnal, from 1940, had some most unfortunate ideas that sound colonial – perhaps left over from our mother church, the Church of England, from the days when England had a significant colonial empire. I cringe at some of the texts, notably “Onward Christian Soldiers,” which seems to intone the Crusades. The committee which made decisions for our 1982 hymnal argued over that hymn for a week and ultimately decided to retain it

because of familiarity, just updating the sexist language. I don't think it would make the cut now.

In the second story from our Gospel today, Jesus takes the deaf man to a private place and unstops the man's ears. Looking up to heaven, Jesus sighs and says, "Be opened." And immediately the man's ears are opened, his tongue is released, and he speaks plainly. This was a whole new world revealed to the man through the healing ministry of Jesus. The man could hear Jesus for the first time.

I wish that for all of us, that we truly hear and understand Jesus, that our ears and our minds can be unstopped, that we can hear the call of the poor and the oppressed and those who suffer in any way, that when we pray, we truly hear and understand what we are saying to God, that we are invested in significant communication. We are worthy to be in this conversation with God. God hears us. Let us hear God, however that response comes, whether in our liturgy, or in our intimate prayers with God, or in our communications with others who are in need. It is all holy conversation.