

WGUMC February 11, 2018 "We Are One"
Mark 7:24-30 and Ephesians 2:11-22

The Syrophenician woman living in the first century has a story for women and men in the twenty-first century. You might say that this unnamed woman started the very first #Me Too movement by demanding that she and her daughter be included in Jesus' healing ministry.

Jesus had been traveling around Galilee, curing diseases and casting out demons and otherwise acting like the Messiah of Israel. But if Jesus was sent by God to bring salvation to the Jews, what was he doing in the region of Tyre, which is Gentile territory?

In the previous chapter, he had been at Gennesaret, on the Sea of Galilee, and had gotten into it with some Pharisees. Word was getting around and he was beginning to get into trouble. So our reading says that he went away to the region of Tyre and didn't want anyone to know he was there.

If that sounds like Jesus is running away, consider this: What do you think would happen if Jesus got too famous too quickly? He wouldn't have the chance to learn what he needed to know. Nor would he have acquired the strength to do what he needed to do. So I like to think that he was in Tyre because the Spirit led him there, just as she had led him into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Going to Tyre was another test. Would the good news be just for the Jews or for the Gentiles, too?

That's the question for Jesus when this woman sneaks past security and falls at his feet, begging him to help her daughter. At first, he tries to put her off, for there are plenty of his own people who need healing. "Let the children be fed first," he says, "for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." This is a "hot mic" moment for Jesus, because here we catch him using an ethnic slur. Jews commonly thought of Gentiles as dogs, and by that they didn't

mean the cute, furry creatures that sleep on the couch and curl up by the fire. Dogs were dirty and despicable and in the mouth of Jesus, this term makes us uncomfortable, but there it is.

Even more troubling, Jesus seems to be saying that there is only so much healing to be had, so much grace to be found, and therefore it shouldn't be wasted on people who don't belong and Gentiles don't belong. Good thing that the woman kneeling at his feet doesn't go along, and she comes right back at him. "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Even the Gentiles have a place at the table and you know what? There is more than enough grace to go around.

This is the lesson that Jesus went to Tyre to learn. This is the truth that was tucked into the woman's words: "If you are the Son of God, you are the Lord of All, and in the kingdom you are bringing, All means *All*."

When Jesus sees her faith, hears her words and receives her wisdom, he responds, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter."

Now, for the first time in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus carries his blessing across the border, bringing the good news beyond the rigid boundaries of race, religion, and ethnicity. Having already broken down many walls, walls that divided men and women, rich and poor, the righteous from the unrighteous, Jesus was coming into his own as a wall hater, a boundary crosser.

This is the Jesus that Paul writes about in his letter to the Ephesians. Paul puts into words the longing that is in every human heart: the longing to belong. As Paul describes it, at one time, we were all without Christ, strangers to the promise, having no hope and being without God in the world. "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought

near....For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall."

Paul is talking about the dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles but there are many other boundaries that divide human beings and there are daily efforts to build even taller walls. But no matter how big and beautiful they are, they cannot stand up to the cross of Christ.

Christ came to take down all the divisions between us and create in himself one new humanity. He came to reconcile us to God in one body. And he did that on the cross. Through his death, he put to death all our hostility. "So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near...you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone."

Some will dismiss Paul's peaceful vision as a pipe dream, a pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by sort of thing. But if you are like Paul, foolish enough to be a follower of Jesus, you can live it in the here and now.

Last year, Hurricane Harvey dumped over 40 inches of rain in many parts of Texas. The flooding in Houston overwhelmed the capacity of first responders to rescue everyone who needed to be rescued. Enter the "Cajun Navy," an all-volunteer force of people with bass boats, jet skis, canoes, trucks and even dune buggies, who jumped in to rescue the folks that the fire fighters, police and national guard couldn't get to. And the video footage of their rescue efforts says it all: Americans are more united than we think we are. No one paid any attention to race or class, gender or religion. No one asked any questions about political persuasion or sexual orientation or country of origin. They just acted on the belief that we are one human family and we are all in this together.

It's too bad that it takes a catastrophe to bring out the best in us.

But we don't have to wait for a hurricane to hit us.

Sometimes all it takes is a Walk to Emmaus. That's the name of the retreat program that many members of this congregation have been a part of in years past. Traci Menicucci is still on the board of our local group, and she could tell you about the hard road they have been on lately. Walk to Emmaus is sponsored by the Upper Room, which is a mostly Methodist organization. But Emmaus is intentionally ecumenical and people from all different churches and no church at all have been involved.

A couple of years ago, they planned a spring "walk" in the North Bay, and one of the clergy who wanted to be involved was a gay man. That caused a heart-wrenching controversy among the board members. Some came from traditions that don't think you can be gay and Christian. Others were afraid that having a gay leader would make some of the participants

uncomfortable. After much discussion, the board voted to change the bylaws to exclude LGBTQ persons from serving in a leadership position in the organization.

Willow Glen had already signed an agreement to host the fall walk that year, and we decided to honor it, but we were upset about it. We had just written our welcoming statement and made it clear to the board that we didn't agree with this policy and we couldn't in good conscience host another walk until this wall came down.

I am very happy to report that the board, with a lot of prayer and soul searching revisited their mission statement and a few weeks ago issued a letter, part of which I'd like to read to you because I believe it captures exactly what our Scriptures today are all about:

...the Board of Directors met this week, and with prayer and compassion, voted to approve a clarification of our mission statement and values:

Grace Emmaus of Silicon Valley has the mission to strengthen church leaders, and enhance their

relationship with Christ. Grace Emmaus is ecumenical, non-denominational, emphasizes the similarities of the Christian denominations, and does not try to solve the differences between denominations.

We also discussed how we can live out that ecumenical vision and will work to create a place that is sacred and safe, emphasizing the name of our community: GRACE Emmaus. In the midst of a polarizing society, we want to emphasize Jesus as the primary focus that overcomes our differences of theological backgrounds and practices. What unites us as a community is our love for God, no matter what church we attend.

In that spirit, the board voted to remove a previous policy that restricted some clergy team members from participating. Grace Emmaus is open to all faithful Christians and will not discriminate.

The board realizes that this is an emotional subject, and members of our community come from different backgrounds with varying opinions and beliefs, because we emphasize cooperation across all bodies of churches. While we also may differ on topics such as communion, baptism, clergy, and divorce, what ties us together, Christ Jesus, is greater than our differences, fears, or limitations. It's through the grace and love of our Lord Jesus Christ that we come together to encourage and support each other.

Let us continue to spread that love through the Emmaus walks, and thereby strengthen our churches and change the world!

Your Grace Emmaus Board

And all God's people said, "Amen!"