

Sermon: Coming Near to the Table

(Preached at St Giles Presbyterian Church, September 5, 2021)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

On August 4, 2020, only thirteen months ago, Father Rabih Thoumy, a Lebanese priest of Saint Maron Church in Beirut was presiding over a weeknight mass. Due to pandemic restrictions at the time, only about ten people were there that night. Holding a chain censer sending smoke up in the air, Thoumy first blessed the altar, then as he turned to bless the people, there was a rumbling—perhaps an earthquake. Lights went out, but Thoumy continued to swing the chain censer, continued to chant the liturgy. A second later, Beirut’s devastating explosion at the port slammed into the church, shattering stain-glass windows, bringing down parts of the ceiling, and sending the priest and parishioners alike running for their lives.

What the world witnessed was a fleeting glimpsed of the horror descended upon the Lebanese people on August 4, through a livestream video from the church. Thankfully, at least in that particular location, no one was injured. The same could not be said of the hundreds who perished, of the thousands who were seriously hurt, and of the hundred of thousands left homeless. The source of the explosion was an illegal and improper storage of 2,750 tones of ammonium nitrate, a chemical used for fertilizer and explosives. It was left there at the port of Beirut for 6 years, out of neglect and incompetence by successive governments. One could describe that explosion, levelling multiple city blocks around the port as another nail in the coffin in the tragic history of Lebanon. Sadly for the city of Beirut, as some have called it: an island of insanity in a sea of madness.

The modern Beirut is located just north of the biblical cities of Tyre and Sidon. A century ago, out of the wreckage of the Ottoman Empire, French diplomats carved out an enclave on that stretch of land on the shore of the Mediterranean. It was supposed to be a kind of reservation for Christians, mostly the Maronites, tracing their roots to the Syriac Church, to their patron saint of Maron.

In the 1940’s when Lebanon declared its independence the city of Beirut was prosperous and westernized, thus gaining the title: ‘Paris of the Middle East’. However, the city descended into religious and sectarian

violence when fightings erupted between the Christians, the Sunni Muslims and the Shi'a Muslims.

From 1975 to 1990, an appalling civil war tore the country apart, killing upwards of 200,000, resulting in a steady exodus of the Maronite Christians out of Lebanon. The end of the civil war did not result in a true peace between the different ethnoreligious groups. With the explosion at Beirut, that once beautiful city is now really left in a precarious position, left to fend for itself, left to pick up crumbs in terms of media attention or international assistance.

The Gospel reading today, in Mark 7:24-37 also has a story of a Gentile woman, in the region of Tyre and Sidon, seemingly begging to pick up crumbs left by Jesus. The story begins with Jesus travelling to the region of Tyre and Sidon. The Scripture informs us that Jesus did not want anyone to know he was there. It is not clear as to why, but Jesus does sometimes need to get away from the crowd, to rest, to pray and to recharge. The choice of Tyre and Sidon is unusual, it is about 100 miles out of the way from Galilee—one has to travel through a fairly rough terrain, just for a bit of R&R.

In any case, the anonymity that Jesus was hoping was not to be, a Gentile woman recognized him, and follow him into the house and bowed down before Jesus. She begged Jesus to cast an unclean spirit out of her daughter. To this request, Jesus replied very impolitely in verse 27, *“Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”*

Let us pause here and unpack this allegorical statement. “Children” refers to the Israelites, the community of faith that has a covenantal relationship with the Lord God. “Food” refers to God’s protection, provision, blessings, and God’s plan of salvation. “Dogs”, in this context, are those outside of this covenantal relationship, also commonly known as the Gentiles.

What Jesus was saying to this Syrophenician woman is a hard to swallow truth: Jesus was sent by God, first and foremost, to bring salvation to the people of Israel. Unless and until that mission is fulfilled, there really is no place for the outsiders. I don’t know if there is anything that is lost in translation, but from my point of view, to be called “dogs”, or to be compared to as dogs is an insult in my culture and in any culture, I suspect. This really cast Jesus in a negative light. It’s one thing if Jesus did not want to heal that woman’s daughter, but did he really have to insult her, and to

insult all her people? Yet, facing such an insult, the woman calmly answered, “*Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.*”

Let us pause here and unpack her statement. The dogs that Jesus was referring to were those outside of the family. Yet the dogs that the woman pointed to, were placed “under the table”, and those dogs eat the children’s crumbs—whatever may be leftover during or after the feast. In essence, they were no longer wild dogs but house pets. They may not enjoy the same status as the children, but they are nevertheless part of the family.

It was a brilliant retort that furthered her request, made her case, yet she did so from a position of humility. To such a retort, Jesus said to her, “*For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.*” So this unnamed woman went home. This Gentile woman of Syrophenician origin, who was not part of the covenantal community, who was not entitled to what Jesus was commissioned to bestow, somehow trusted in Jesus, she went home and found her child healed and the unclean spirit gone.

In so far as this story is concerned, one cannot judge a book by its cover, If you get stuck with what Jesus said, how impolitely he said it, and how stingy he made of what he offers—that salvation is only for Israel—then you would have missed out on the central point.

Here is the theological truth, when it comes to the grace of God, it is rich, it is abundant, and it has no limit. The focus should not be what Jesus said initially, but on what he did eventually. And what we saw was grace of God overflowing...

By even travelling to a Gentile region of Tyre and Sidon, Jesus made salvation accessible to those outside of Israel. By even talking to that Gentile woman, he made salvation possible. By being open that the woman’s retort, which should really be viewed as a theological exchange, Jesus then made salvation a reality to not only her, but others who seeks humbly.

As the author of Mark continues to recount this story, Jesus went on to Decapolis, yet another Gentile region. There he came across a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech. Jesus opened his ears, released his tongue. Even though he ordered his disciples not to tell others, the more he ordered, the more they zealously proclaimed the glory of God they saw in Jesus the Christ.

Jesus would go on, in the rest of the Gospel accounts, to gather other outsiders, outcasts of the society—sinners, tax-collectors, prostitutes, Jews

and Gentiles. He doesn't discriminate, he doesn't differentiate. He gathers them all and brings them to his table, not under but around it as full participants, in the coming Kingdom of God.

Reflecting on this story of this unnamed Gentile woman, here is what Heidi Husted wrote in the Christian Century, "*The day the gospel went to the dogs was the day it came to us. We are some of the "dogs" who have received the good news of the gospel! When Jesus opened himself up to mission to the whole world, he opened his church to the world. Now we are to open ourselves to the whole world in mission.*"

Whenever we celebrate the Holy Communion in the Presbyterian Church in Canada, there are a few set invitations that the presider will say. This is one of my favourite:

*This is the joyful feast of the people of God!
They will come from east and west,
and from north and south,
and sit at table in the kingdom of God.*

Here is another invitation:

*This is the Lord's table.
Our Saviour invites all those who trust him
to share the feast which he has prepared.
O taste and see that the Lord is good.*

The invitation is not from me, or from other ministers. The invitation is from Christ himself, from our saviour, our Lord.

Are you still on the outside? Are you perhaps on the edge of the table, consigned to only to pick up crumbs? Come, come near to the table.

Are you still resisting, unwilling to sit by the table? Still feeling unworthy, still feeling undeserving? Come, come near to the table.

Are you still focusing on boundaries made by the society? Are you still unable to see the blessing that God has already prepared for you? Come, come near to the table

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.