

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Sunday, September 8, 2024**

**“The Bread of Life”
Mark 7:24-37**

Guest Minister: Rev. Linda Robinson

We spend much of our lives interacting with other people. Some of us are very curious about the lives of those around us, some would even say we are noseys, always poking our noses in, where they don't belong. And that may be so – at least some of the time, but some people are just more observant of others; curious about life, perhaps concerned for others.

But most people simply go about their daily lives, rarely even really seeing those around them. We might say hello to the clerk in the pharmacy or grocery store, nod to our neighbour, but we really have no idea what is occurring right in our own neighbourhoods.

When teachers speak of the violence perpetrated daily in their classrooms, both physical and verbal, I find it incomprehensible.

I remember one high school teacher who, if sworn at in school would phone the parents that evening and repeat to them what their child had said to her. She would tell them she assumed they didn't like been sworn at anymore than she did and that she expected them to work with her to change the student's behaviour. She was also one of the teachers who chaperoned school dances and was willing to help organize them.

Like many of you, I remember that a trip to the principal's office often meant the strap, a note home and more consequences there. As students we were expected to respect the authority of teachers, sometimes even when we ourselves were not respected by the teachers. School was not always the best learning place, depending on our teachers, and yet, somehow, we learned, even thrived. Perhaps because we were all in the same boat. The rules of engagement were, for the most part, the same for all of us.

In my elementary school, no one was welcome in the lunchroom – so the 20 or 30 of us who dared bring a lunch, ate quietly. The teacher tasked with supervising us told us frequently that we had no business bringing our lunch to school because she didn't want to have to be there with us. As soon as we were done, we were locked outside for one hour. The only way back in – was through the front door, past the principal's office. That was all our reality, so as children we played with each other, sometimes even cared for each other during the time outside.

At the beginning of the 19th century, hospitals were established across Canada, including the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto. It was well known that hospitals were not the best place to recover from some illnesses because so many people who went into hospital never recovered. One doctor who worked at Sick Kids, was concerned that children who should have recovered and gone home, died instead.

He was puzzled – the infants were fed, tended to, kept very clean, seemed to be recovering and then declined and died. In Toronto the death rate was higher than many hospitals reported from Europe. He received permission to do some extra training in Europe, and while there he planned on exploring the death rate differences as well. What he found baffled him. The level of

care between Canada and European hospitals was the same, as was the level of food given and in fact, sometimes the cleanliness in Canada was superior. The only difference he could see was that when infants in Europe were fed, each infant was picked up, perhaps rocked, talked to, smiled at before being changed and returned to their cot. In Canada, at feeding time, nurses would stand between 2 cots and leaving the infant in their cot, feed 2 infants at the same time. It was more efficient and perhaps thought to transmit fewer germs. Could picking up an infant to feed and interact with them really make a difference between life or death?

When the doctor returned to Canada, he insisted that all his young patients be picked up for their feedings, even talked to, sung to, cuddled a bit before being put back in their cots. He faced fierce resistance of course, until death rates began to decline, more and more infants recovered, lived and returned home healthy. This doctor had discovered that warmth, and food and proper medicine wasn't enough when the deep warmth of human contact and personal interaction is missing.

Throughout the New Testament, we encounter the stories of people interacting with Jesus. Sometimes they are stories of teaching but most often the stories include teaching, healing and of course, eating. We often see them and speak of them as stories about the miracles of Jesus. But scripture itself would have us understand these stories as Jesus' teachings, rather than miracles. Yes, what often happened was miraculous, but these miracles always occurred in the context of teaching.

In today's reading from the Gospel according to Mark, Jesus has travelled to an area that is largely populated by Gentiles. It would seem he is seeking anonymity. But as always seems to happen, word gets out and a woman enters the house where he is staying, bows down at his feet and begs that he heal her daughter. The woman is a gentile, her daughter seriously possessed by a demon. His answer is brisk and to the point, his food/message/teachings/miracles/healing is for the children of God, the Jews, not Gentile dogs.

Not to be deterred and determined to get what she needs, this Gentile woman and mother, reminds him that even the dogs are allowed to eat whatever crumbs they can find beneath the table. In fact, doors were often left open so dogs could come and go as they pleased. The crumbs on the floor take nothing from others.

An encounter - powerful, painful, truthful, face to face, each stating their own reality/understanding of their lives at that moment. A woman, a mother, desperate for help, Jesus deeply desiring to reach his fellow Jews with the Good News, each determined to do what they need to do. That is life at its depth.

Jesus does respond to the woman's plea as we expect him to do, her daughter is healed – given the crumb that is needed so she might have life. And having done what he could there, Jesus moves on to another place to offer lifegiving grace another time.

This time, it is a crowd who brings the man to Jesus, someone who can neither speak nor hear. Jesus takes the man off to one side, away from the crowd. In private, Jesus put his fingers in the man's ears, then spat on the man's tongue. And then praying commanded that the man's ears be open, and his tongue released, while ordering the crowd to tell no one.

But of course, the crowd spoke of what had happened, exclaiming about how well Jesus did everything. But even as we exclaim about the wonder of these miracles, we find ourselves lost in the miracles and in danger of missing the point. Jesus did not come to just physically feed us

bread or breadcrumbs. He did not just come to heal us of all our ailments – as appealing as that is. Jesus came to reveal to us God's presence, God's love, God's justice, God's hope throughout our daily life. We sometimes say that Jesus is "the bread of life" especially when we celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion, and it is that "bread of life" that allows us to live and learn of Him whatever our life's circumstances.

In every encounter in scripture, we get the sense that Jesus looks at the person he is encountering, looks and listens and responds. He is not simply offering healing, he is offering life, something much more profound, something that sustains, strengthens, offers hope, joy. For the disciples, this passage, opens to them the beginning of a mission to the Gentiles, for us, a reminder that God responds to those who seek the life-giving bread of God -Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour. Amen.