

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23; Mark 7:24-37

Grace to you and Peace from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

The book of Proverbs is a book of wisdom, of wise sayings; we might even say that it is a book of One Liners. They're one-liners that are meant to build not only individual moral character, but assist in the formation of, as commentator Alyce McKenzie put it, "a wise community rooted in the peace and justice of God." I think this holds true with the verses that we heard this evening. Verse 1: "A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold." Perhaps you've heard the old adage: It takes twenty years to build a reputation, and five minutes to lose it. (I think that's a saying of Benjamin Franklin's from "Poor Richard's Almanac," but it might also be Mae West, I am not sure.) But a good reputation can open business doors and social doors, sometimes a good reputation can perhaps get you a better table at a restaurant. I think a good name; a good reputation will almost always get you the respect and admiration of others who are striving to live a good, productive and moral life.

A "good name," though, is NOT something that those folks who came from the north of Israel had. We know that area today as Lebanon. In first century Galilee, it was known simply as "Syria." And the woman in our gospel reading today, in the first part of our gospel reading, she was called a "Syrophoenician;" well, that's kind of like calling someone "German American." The Phoenicians had settled in that area centuries before and even though those two cities, Tyre and Sidon were in what they would call the country "Syria," they differentiated themselves from the other folks who settled there a few centuries previous, those Greeks when Alexander the Great came through from Greece and went on into northern Africa and his folks settled in that area. They differentiated themselves from the Greeks to Syrophoenicians. It's kind of similar, if you've ever met somebody of Norwegian American heritage, you don't ever refer to them as being Swedish American. Or to bring a little closer to home, I have met people who are very, shall we say, are very particular about whether or not it is "East Shore" or "West Shore." So she's Syrophoenician – she's not Greek. She is the SAME as a Greek, in as much as she is a **Gentile**. And that's the main point of our Gospel lesson. This woman in the first story, she is NOT a Jew. She IS a Gentile. She's NOT among the chosen people. She's not someone who would necessarily be interested in what's happening in the Jewish world. Gentiles do NOT have a good reputation. They do not have a good name among the Jewish Believers. So maybe we shouldn't be all that surprising that when this woman approaches Jesus with a request, she gets rejected, at last at first. Let's look at what's going on.

Now, in Mark's gospel, up until this point, remember here we are in chapter seven. The first six chapters Jesus has begun his ministry. He's called at twelve, he's done several healings, most of them, if not all of them, have been on Jewish believers. He has been rejected by the people in his own home town. He's fed the 5,000, he's walked on water, and he's been questioned by the religious police, I mean, religious leaders. He is a male in first century Middle East where you don't talk to women. You especially don't talk to women in public and you really don't talk to

women in public if you're NOT related to them. And there is definitely no way that you talk to a GENTILE in any gender, period. It's just not done.

But he's far away from home (where he was rejected anyway.) He's trying to find some quiet time, maybe get himself a few days rest, catch some down time, kick back a little. I can relate to wanting to rest for a while. When this woman, this Gentile Woman approaches him and begins to speak to him. Now to try to understand this a little better, let me tell you a quick little story. A couple of nights ago my wife and I were down in our basement. We live in an old house, nothing that is straight and nothing that is square. The doorway to our basement is of course not a standard height, it's only six feet tall and I am slightly less than six feet so it shouldn't be a problem, except immediately upon exiting you have to step up nine inches. Now I have learned the hard way, and I do mean hard, that when I leave the basement I need to be looking down at the stair in order to not crack my head on the lintel. But the other night Marianne was in the basement with me, it was the end of the day, I had been doing laundry, I was tired, I was cranky and she's with me and I don't even remember what we were doing and she started to go up the stairs, and I am watching my very attractive wife go up the stairs and not paying attention to what I am doing and what did I do, but I go and crack my head right on the lintel and I honestly don't remember what I said, but I was verbal about it and Marianne says 'what's wrong?' and I responded 'What do you think. . .' and I stopped myself. Because I knew I was not angry at her, I am angry at me, because I just done something stupid because I am more interested in watching this really cute woman go in front of me that I didn't pay any attention to what I am doing. And it is my fault, it is not hers, so I quickly stop myself and said a much calmer voice, 'I did what I always did and cracked my head on the door.'

I kind of wonder if maybe that's what happened with Jesus. He's been having it rough. He's just got done talking to, if you remember the gospel reading from last week when they were harassing him about why don't you disciples wash their hands before they eat? Does it really matter? Now, maybe he was cranky, maybe he was tired, maybe he was at the end of a long day and somebody comes up to him out of the blue and starts talking to him. More than starts talking to him, throws herself at his feet and begins to beg him to help her, to help her child. Now he can tell, he knows she is not a Jew, he knows he shouldn't be talking to her. We don't really know why he says what he says, but we do know what happens. Now it could be that maybe he lost his temper, it could be that maybe he was spotted in the manner in which he did because deep down he's a bigot and he doesn't want anything to do with Syrophoenicians. But it could be as well that Jesus indeed knew what her faith was and yet he said this out loud so that other people, not only his own disciples, but the Gentiles who were gathered there as well could hear now much faith this Gentile woman had. This Gentile woman who really shouldn't have anything to do with this Jewish man, for all kinds of social reasons, for all kinds of economic reasons, but somehow or other, this Syrophoenician woman had heard about Jesus, had heard about the good that he had done, had heard about his proclamations of the Lord God, of the grace and the love and the healing that God does; that God gives. Somehow or other, all the way up there into Syria, Jesus' reputation, his good name had gone before him, and this Gentile woman who wouldn't normally be a worshiper of the Lord God Almighty comes to Jesus, as God's representative here on earth, to ask for healing.

In so healing this little girl, Jesus does more than simply bring her back to health. He's doing more than just casting out this unclean spirit from her: he's restoring this girl to her community. He's bringing her back into the oneness of her own family. And even beyond that in Mark's gospel this is the beginning of where we see that Jesus came to be the messenger of God to more than just the Jewish people. He came to bear that witness of God's love and grace to all those dogs under the kitchen table, as the woman said. Those critters fighting over the scraps, and that's a really important thing because I'm one of those dogs.

When he heals this little girl, Jesus also brings to life those other sayings that we heard tonight: "The rich and the poor have this in common: the LORD God is maker of them all. Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor. Do not rob the poor because they are poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate; for the LORD pleads their cause and despoils the life of those who despoil them." We see that as well in the story of Jesus healing the deaf and mute man. We see in Mark's gospel, in these stories, that Jesus has come to right injustice. He is there to remind us that there are no kind of external barriers between us, any of us – between us and God. No barriers of age or ethnic heritage. No barriers of physical health or abilities. No barriers of economic standards, nothing stands in the way, not even being Jewish or Syrophenician between us and God. Because God has this reputation as well. God has a good name. It's the name that brings love and forgiveness to all of us.

And so in the name of God, we say, Amen.