

Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 23
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Sunday, September 6, 2009
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Isaiah 35:4-71; Psalm 146;
James 2:1-17; Mark 7:24-37

Good morning! Beautiful day, isn't it? I love this time of year! The temperature is beginning to change. Soon we'll see the colors on the leaves start to turn to red, gold, and orange. And college football is about to begin. Actually, it's already begun – teams and cheerleaders have taken the field and there's excitement in the air! You can feel the energy.

There's another aspect I love about this time of year. Being a parent of two boys in school, I'm glad the school year has begun. But don't get me wrong. I enjoyed our summer vacation – we had fun together – but it's also nice to see the kids get back to their jobs at school. It makes me remember the days when I went to school – the pride of changing to a new grade, of meeting a new teacher, new classmates, getting interested in new courses. There's also a new love that I have for this time of year: my job as a seminary intern.

I am fortunate to be at a church like Trinity where I can live on campus and commute, so I also have the benefit of meeting lots of new people coming onto campus for their first year at seminary. I can hear their stories about how God is calling them to ministry, and I can hear about the struggles that they have, and the fears that they have. And I count that as a blessing.

These examples of love for this time of year remind us that as we cheer for certain parts of the year – the changing of the leaves, the football season, school starting, cheering for our winning teams – we get to meet new people and we get to cheer for them.

But remember that this time of year may not be everyone's favorite. Many people find this time of year difficult, frustrating, and sorrowful. While some cheer for a new school year, others find a new school year terrifying; a time of being bullied and out-casted. Many children and young adults find the start of a new school year to be like that of returning to a war zone where you don't even have a friend to turn to, where you don't even have a friend to watch your back. In the time of some of our cheering for the winning team, sometimes we don't realize, or recognize, that while one wins, another loses.

In our text from James this morning, we are reminded by the author that our behavior in relation to others reflects the beliefs we hold true. James says that if we show favoritism to people wearing fine clothes and gold rings, can we really believe in Jesus Christ? I have this feeling a lot when I read the Bible; I am often amazed how Bible writings from two thousand or more years ago often reflect life for us today. The issue occurred then, as well as it occurs today: people cheer for the winning team, back then and today. And in this case, James is speaking of the "winning team" being the wealthy people. You see, when they come to church, they are awarded the "box" seats, while the poor, the ones without gold rings and fine clothes, are told to sit on the floor or over to the side, on the margins – out of sight, in other words.

James says, “Has God not chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom . . . ?” He writes that you and I are to be a different kind of cheerleader; we are to cheer for the one who is obviously not winning in the eyes of the world; you could say cheering for the underdog, but the underdog has a chance to win, James is telling us to cheer for the dog that has no chance of winning.

You may be a little bit shocked that I used that word “dog,” but I used it because those are the words in the Gospel text this morning, words spoken by our Lord Jesus Christ. You see, in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus has begun to move outside of his own boundaries, moving outside the Jewish protected society. He has gone to the city of Tyre and the area of the Decapolis, regions that were highly populated by the Gentiles, the outsiders.

It seems that Jesus is on some type of retreat, a get-away. He doesn’t want anyone to know that He’s there – maybe a bit of rest and relaxation – but the word is out about Him, even to those far away areas Jesus has not yet visited. And good news travels fast. He is confronted by a foreign woman; to be precise, a Syrophenician woman; a person so low on the Israelite totem pole that Jesus could have effectively dismissed her without a thought, and nobody would have said a thing.

You see, she had three things going against her: 1) she was an enemy of the Israelites; 2) she was a she, a woman of low status in that male dominated society; and 3) she had a daughter that was demon possessed. Now during this time, any sickness, especially demon possession, pointed to the fact that the parents must have sinned. And so because of this fact about her daughter, the woman must be a sinner and therefore must be undergoing punishment from God. Why would anyone want to give aid to someone who was being punished by God? After all, she deserves what she gets.

In a sense, we should almost cheer for her punishment, not for healing. Definitely not a winner, she has no chance of even finishing the race – cast her out. These words sound harsh, but don’t we do that today? Don’t we do that when we turn our backs on the poor and talk to only those of wealthy status? James reminds us to love our neighbors as ourselves. But it’s so much easier and more socially acceptable now to only love ourselves and forget about the neighbor. The neighbor gets what they deserve, especially if it’s pain and despair.

But you are different. For starters, you are here. You open your heart to God’s word being proclaimed through the message of Jesus Christ. You take a chance on community, on a heavenly meal, and on the promises in baptism. You challenge yourself by opening your heart to the promise of supporting and praying for your brothers and sisters. You give away your time, and you give away the things which the world proclaims to be the highest accolades; you give away your riches in order to be rich in faith. The love you have for God is greater than the love you have for money.

These things – all of them – are what it means to love your neighbor as yourself. Not because we earn our way into God’s favor, not because we perform some magical act to be accepted into heaven. You give your time and possessions because of what God has given you – the gift of Jesus Christ, the bread and wine, and the supernatural mixture of water and word. After all, you

are baptized into a new life, the life of cheering for not only the underdogs, but for the dogs themselves. This is one of the hardest things for me to say to you today – you and I, we’re the dogs in the Gospel. We’re the dogs that Jesus has come to save. If for nothing else, that is reason to stand up and cheer. The world needs cheerleaders.

And finally upon ending, I would like to share a story with you that occurred to me just a few months ago, and each time I tell it, it gets to me. I recently went to a school presentation at my children’s school where all the grades were involved. The show was mediocre at best. The sound system had feedback, the children were missing their lines, they looked at the ground, they were nervous – all of which made hearing very difficult. The costumes were falling off, or they hung precariously on the children. It was apparent early on that the sooner the show ended, the better. We could all go home and nurse our children to try again next time and to forget about the evening’s failure.

Finally, after forever, the show came to a close and the curtain was drawn. The audience politely applauded, there was a bit of chuckling. And then as the curtain opened again, the children stood in a row, ready to take their bows. At that moment, one woman jumped out of her seat, clapping excitedly and cheering. I thought to myself, Good Lord, this woman is nuts! Didn’t she see the same show that I saw? But then my eyes moved from her to the stage, where I saw her daughter, and soon my look of disbelief changed. The woman’s daughter had a smile as big as Manhattan. And then another person stood up and clapped, and then another, and another, until all of us – the whole audience – stood applauding joyously, each child beaming with the pride they deserved.

That night, through one woman, Jesus made our deaf ears hear and our muted tongues speak. Not because the show was flawless, but because we all need cheerleaders. Now maybe more than ever, we can be different.

Amen.