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Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, September 9, 2018
16th Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 23/Proper 18/Year B
Primary Text: Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23
Sermon Title: “The Seven Faith Practices - Study”

Theme

In Mark’s gospel, encounters with women usually signify turning points in Jesus’ ministry. Here, a conversation with a Syrophoenician woman marks the beginning of his mission to the Gentiles.

Text

²⁴[Jesus] set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice,²⁵ but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. ²⁶Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷He said to her, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” ²⁸But she answered him, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” ²⁹Then he said to her, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.” ³⁰So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

³¹Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. ³²They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. ³³He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. ³⁴Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” ³⁵And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. ³⁶Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. ³⁷They were astounded beyond measure, saying, “He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.”

Sermon

For those of you in a serious love relationship, do you remember when you first met? Do you remember wanting to know everything about the other? Do you remember how the time just seemed to fly by when you were together?

I remember the first time I saw Carol. It was about this time of year, 1980. She was doing her student teaching in Marion and I was a co-op engineering student also in Marion. We met at my church that early fall evening for a little reunion concert by a local singer-evangelist. A week later I asked her out on a date and we've never stopped being a couple since then. We were married less than a year later, now over 37 years ago.

Since then I would like to tell you that we still have all those tingly feelings that we had back then, but you know that as relationships mature, those tingly feelings are often (but not always) replaced with deeper feelings of comfort and security. Or as one person said, "A good marriage is like a good wine. It gets better with age." Or, as another put it, "A good marriage is like a good cardio workout. If it's never challenging, you're probably not doing it right."

If we had the time we could go around the room and each one of us could tell their story of how we became Christian. For me as one raised in the church, there were several times when I claimed and then reclaimed for myself, the faith that my parents had taught me.

At the beginning, similar to when I first met Carol, I wanted to be with God all the time, and I did that through study of scripture on my own and in groups, by attending worship services, and by fellowshiping with other believers.

But then, not unlike a marriage, life gets more complicated. There is career, and hobbies, and new friends, and children and their activities and life seems to go by at a dizzying speed.

For many people, obviously not you all, the spiritual life can be the thing that is pushed out, because it does not make demands of us, like other activities do. And then tragically, one day we ask ourselves, "How long has it been since I was in worship, or read the Bible, or prayed?"

That is the purpose of this seven week sermon series on the Seven Faith Practices. The Seven Faith Practices were developed by the ELCA back in 2001 and personally, I think it is some of the best work that the ELCA has ever done. The Seven Faith Practices are seven verbs, seven action words that define the life of a disciple. And over the next seven weeks we will spend a week each on each one. The disciple cannot pick and choose which of the Seven Faith Practices to practice. All are equally important and not one can be left out, although in God's creative genius, God gave each of us different personalities and characteristics and so it is only natural that we might find ourselves disproportionately involved in one or more of the Seven. That's completely OK.

I would like to use the example of a good marriage to set the stage for the need for the Faith Practice of Study and in a few moments Jason Crist, the leader of the Study Table will join me to tell you what the Study Table does to facilitate the disciple's Study life.

"The regular study of the Bible and books that help to enliven its message (e.g., Luther's catechisms, commentaries, and other study resources) is a key way the disciple practices loving and knowing God. Study happens privately through personal Bible study and a regular devotional time. Study also happens publicly as family and friends learn together, in small groups, and through large gatherings of formal study and worship. The maturing disciple attends to study in both private and communal contexts. Through reading, meditating and the study of Scripture, the lively word of Grace becomes active in the lives of believers. For thousands of years, the words of Jesus, the teachings of the prophets and apostles, and the stories of God's people have revealed God's heart and hope for the world and each one of us. The Holy Spirit inspires us through Scripture to see ourselves as we are and as God would have us become. Through the Bible we come to understand how God works in the world, for the world and through people like us."

From Living Faith Congregational Planning Guide

For example, in today's Gospel Reading Jesus seems to shame a Syrophoenician woman and maybe even calls her a dog. Now if you want to know why your Lord Jesus would do that, then your answer will come when you study scripture. That is called the Faith Practice of Study.

Today is the appropriate day to be talking about the Faith Practice of Study because it is Rally Day the traditional beginning of the Church's program year. Before I invite Jason up, I want to encourage each of you to listen carefully to all that is being offered here at Zion for disciples of all ages and commit to deepening your relationship with God through the Faith Practice of Study. If you really love God revealed in Jesus Christ, then I know you will want to spend time with him, learning everything you can about him, and how you can honor and praise him with the living of your life. And we, your Church and your fellow disciples can help. You belong here. We belong together.

Now here is Jason Crist, the Study Table leader.

(See last pages)

Prayer

Loving God, you seek us and make yourself known to us through the study of sacred writings. We thank you for Jason and his leadership and all those who teach us. Bless them in their teaching and us in our learning as we begin this new program year. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen