

**15 Pentecost  
September 5, 2021**

**In the name of God the Father,  
God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.**

**Amen.**

The gospel reading for today (Mark 7:24-37) is a very difficult one for us to deal with. A gentile woman (one who is not Jewish) comes to Jesus to beg Him to heal her daughter. Jesus replies, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she answered Him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then He said to her, "For saying that, you may go - the demon has left your daughter."

One of the problems that we have in reading the Bible is that we can only read the words of what people say. We cannot tell what the tone of voice or the facial expression was. Did Jesus address this woman in a gentle voice and with a wink? Or was He trying to get her to confess her faith in the God of the Jews? Or was He acting like a first century Jew who would not wish to deal with a gentile? If the last theory is correct, then this woman forced Jesus to step outside His comfort zone.

Jesus' followers certainly learned to step outside their comfort zones. Look at St. Peter. According to The Acts of the Apostles in the New Testament, a pious officer in the Roman army named Cornelius had a vision of an angel who said to him, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter."

The next day as Peter was waiting for his lunch, he had a vision of a large sheet being lowered from Heaven with all kinds of animals that a Jew was forbidden to eat. A voice said, "Get up Peter, kill and eat." Peter replied, "By no means Lord, for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." Some one once said that God told Peter to do something and Peter said to God, "I can't. It's against my religion." God told Peter, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." This happened three times so that Peter finally got the message.

Just then the men from Cornelius arrived and Peter and some companions travelled to Cornelius' home. Peter said to the gentiles there, "You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to a gentile, but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean." Then Peter proceeded to preach about Jesus.

Or let us look at St. Paul. Paul was raised as a Pharisee to believe that the road to eternal salvation was to obey all the rules of the Jewish law. When he first encountered the Christian faith, he hated it and he viciously persecuted followers of Jesus. Then Paul encountered the risen Christ outside Damascus. Jesus said to Paul, "Saul (his Jewish name) Saul, why do you

persecute me?" Paul asked, "Who are you Lord?" Jesus answered, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting."

Paul then had to totally reorient his life. According to what he wrote in one of his letters, Paul spent some time by himself to use a modern expression, to get his act together. Before he could embark upon his mission as a Christian apostle, Paul had to step outside his comfort zone.

Lately, there has been a great deal of discussion in this country about race relations. But racism is not new and it is not confined to the United States. Look at history at how the Nazis persecuted the Jews, or the civil war in Rwanda, or the conflict in Bosnia, or how in the Muslim world, the Sunnis and the Shiites hate each other. Racism is an equal opportunity sin.

And it is all rooted in the refusal of people to step outside of one's comfort zone. The other person is not like me so that person must be bad. If one got to know another person from a different race, or different ethnic group, or different social or economic class, as an individual and not as a stereotype then prejudice would melt away.

But enough about people in the Bible or history. What about you and me? You never know when God will present you the opportunity to step outside your comfort zone. When I was fourteen, I was sent by my parents to an Episcopal boarding school. I was outside my comfort zone since I was not raised in an Episcopal Church home. Had I not gone there, however, I would not be standing here today. How about you? Has God ever called you outside of your comfort zone? Is He calling you outside of your comfort zone now?

Let us look at the sacrament of Holy Baptism. Baptism is meant to be a spiritual journey outside of one's comfort zone because God is calling us to become more and more the person that God created us to be, and that is not where our comfort zone is. Our comfort zone is to be selfish and have the world revolve around us.

In the baptismal service, if a child is being baptized, the priest asks the parents and godparents of the child, "Will you by your prayers and witness help this child to grow into the full stature of Christ?" If an adult is baptized, the priest asks that question of the adult. The whole idea is that the Christian life is a spiritual journey out of a comfort zone of selfishness to obedience to God.

So as I said before, one never knows when God will present an opportunity to step outside of one's comfort zone. Our Lord Himself may have learned that as countless of His followers. Hopefully, with God's grace, that includes all of us.

Let us pray - O God, give us we pray you, light on our right hands, and light on our left hands, and light above us, and light beneath us. O Lord, increase light within us, and give us light to illuminate us, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

