

POOR

Mark 7:24-37

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Series B)

September 5, 2021

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The gospel lesson for the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost comes from *The Gospel According to Mark*, chapter 7, verses 24 through 37. This occurs immediately after Jesus condemned the scribes and Pharisees for hypocrisy, and exposed the poor condition of our hearts. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Mark 7, beginning at verse 24, we read in Jesus' name.

²⁴ And from there he arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And he entered a house and did not want anyone to know, yet he could not be hidden. ²⁵ But immediately a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit heard of him and came and fell down at his feet. ²⁶ Now the woman was a Gentile, a Syrophenician by birth. And she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷ And he said to her, **“Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.”** ²⁸ But she answered him, “Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” ²⁹ And he said to her, **“For this statement you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter.”** ³⁰ And she went home and found the child lying in bed and the demon gone.

³¹ Then he returned from the region of Tyre and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. ³² And they brought to him a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment, and they begged him to lay his hand on him. ³³ And taking him aside from the crowd privately, he put his fingers into his ears, and after spitting touched his tongue. ³⁴ And looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, **“Ephphatha,”** that is, **“Be opened.”** ³⁵ And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. ³⁶ And Jesus charged them to tell no one. But the more he charged them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. ³⁷ And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, “He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.”

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

We are poor sinners. And this is important for us to understand for two basic reasons. First, because it's true. Second, because our Father in heaven is merciful to the poor, especially those who are spiritually poor (Matt. 5:3).

We confess this every Sunday: “Almighty God, our Maker and Redeemer, we *poor* sinners confess to You that we are by nature sinful and unclean, and that we have sinned against You in thought, word, and deed.”

The way we confess our sin is important. It is important that the words we use accurately describe our condition. Whenever we can get away with it, we undersell our sins. We do this with other people, and we sometimes get away with it. We confess the sins that people already

know about. But if something is still a secret, we hold it back. Or we try to justify ourselves by pleading ignorance. “I’m sorry officer, I didn’t know the speed limit was 55.” We make excuses.

We do the same thing with God. We know that we are sinful, and we know that we need to confess our sins before God, but we are tempted to confess the minimum. We would like to say something like, “I tried, but I didn’t quite get it right. Please forgive me,” or, “Give me a second chance,” or we might even leave out the sin that troubles our conscience the most. Our confessions often fall short of the truth.

So it’s important to think about the manner in which we confess our sins. It’s important that the words we use are accurate and, as much as possible, complete. If you come for private confession, I’ll give you some words that you can use as a general confession of sin. You are free to add specific sins that trouble your conscience, or you are free to use your own words completely. But for our corporate confession together, we always use the same words. And there’s no command from the Bible that we have to use these exact words and not some others. Perhaps we will use a different form sometime. But we’re not going to use any form of confession that sells our sin short. Some confessions only confess our actual sins. Others only confess that our nature is sinful, as if that’s an excuse to not confess our actual sins. Some confessions don’t really seek forgiveness, but merely ask for help in doing better. Others present our sincerity as the reason God should forgive us. We are free to use different words, but we are not free to sell our sin short or justify ourselves before God.

The form we use is valuable because it is accurate. It does not sell our sin short. And by confessing rightly, it teaches us about our sin. And the word I want to focus on today is “poor.” We confess that we are “*poor* sinners.”

Nobody wants to be poor. And it’s not really the lack of possessions that we find undesirable, but the status of being poor. Nobody wants to have less than other people. I mean, in our world, and especially in our country, those who live under the poverty line have more than many people in the world, and they certainly have more than most people had a hundred years ago. Generations before us, people were happier with less. So part of what’s so undesirable is simply the status of being poor. It hurts to have less than other people.

And for us, in regards to our sin, we don’t want to admit that we are poor sinners. So we might actually be willing to admit all the sins we have committed if we can maintain the status of being average or better. We might admit to lying, cheating, stealing, and harming other people as long as we can maintain that we are middle class sinners.

But God’s Word does not leave room for middle class sinners. He does not judge us in relation to one another. There’s no moving poverty line. We are all poor sinners.

So what does it mean to be poor sinners? It means that we are poor in terms of righteousness. We all fall below God’s line. This is one of the things James taught us in the epistle lesson. “Whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. For he who said, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ also said, ‘Do not murder.’ If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.” (James 2:10-11).

The specific sin James addresses in that passage is the sin of partiality. That is, the churches were treating the rich better than the poor. So by bringing up the sin of murder, he makes a connection between the sin of partiality and the sin of murder. By showing partiality to the rich man, they were valuing his life as more valuable than the poor man’s life. We might not think to equate partiality with murder, but the nature of it is really the same. It’s devaluing the life of a person.

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I think we do this quite often. And we do it without thinking about it. We can't help but do it. And since we can't help but do it, we don't think of it as being that big of a deal. But it is. What makes a human life valuable? According to God's Word, it is being created after his image (Gen. 9:6). This means that every human life is equally valuable, regardless of size, skin color, social status, or any other factor, even wealth. We may accept this as true. I hope we do. But we often live differently. We live as if a person's function is what makes them valuable. We do this because, in our sinful natures, we really consider ourselves to be supremely valuable. And if we are supremely valuable, then the value of other people is the benefit they can provide to us. We treat people differently based on how valuable they are to us, when we should really treat them based on how valuable they are to God. That's the sin of partiality.

And if you have committed this sin, or any other sin, you have become a transgressor of God's entire law. We are all poor in spirit. Or another way to say it is that we are all weak in terms of righteousness. We cannot buy our way out of poverty. We cannot work our way out.

In each of the texts today, Jesus comes to the rescue of the poor and weak.

Beginning with the introit, or "entrance psalm,"

"To you, O LORD, I call;
my rock, be not deaf to me,
lest, if you be silent to me,
I become like those who go down to the pit" (Ps. 28:1).

And,

"The LORD is the strength of his people;
he is the saving refuge of his anointed" (Ps. 28:8).

Jesus comes to rescue those who are weak. He comes to save poor sinners who cannot help themselves.

The same theme continues in the Old Testament lesson from Isaiah,

"Say to those who have an anxious heart,
'Be strong; fear not!
Behold, your God
will come with vengeance,
with the recompense of God.
He will come and save you.' " (Is. 35:4).

Isaiah commands us to be strong, but not in our own strength. Our strength is that our Lord Jesus Christ comes to save us. Then Isaiah goes on to speak of healing when the Lord comes. "The ears of the deaf [shall be] unstopped ... and the tongue of the mute sing for joy" (Is. 35:5-6). Isaiah mentions other infirmities as well, and Jesus healed those too, but in today's gospel lesson we see him healing deafness and muteness. When Jesus comes and performs these healings that Isaiah prophesied, it proclaims that he is our God who has come to save us. The healings are signs that he comes to save poor sinners. This is the mission we should have in mind when he goes to the cross. The cross is what he does, not to heal one or two people, like we see in the gospel lesson, but to save and heal all who believe in him.

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In the epistle lesson, James speaks more directly to poverty. “Has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom?” (James 2:5). This is part of why their sin of partiality made no sense. If anything, the Christian Church should be especially welcoming to the poor. James goes on, “Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court?” (James 2:6). There’s something to this. The rich are more likely to be oppressors, because wealth provides power. The poor simply have less ability to oppress others. Of course, this doesn’t mean that every rich person is an oppressor. Some have gone too far in saying that everyone who is in a certain class that has power or wealth is necessarily an oppressor. This is not true. Those who have power or wealth should use it to serve others, and some do. But there is a particular temptation that comes along with wealth. It gives the power to exert control over others. Or it may be that a person becomes wealthy by oppressing the poor. That happens. It’s easier to become rich if you don’t care who you hurt. This happens in a fallen and corrupt world. But God chose the poor and weak to become heirs of his kingdom. That’s the way God works. He humbles those who are proud, and he lifts up those who are brought low (Prov. 3:34; James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5). Jesus comes to the rescue of the poor and weak.

And, of course, we see this same theme in the gospel lesson. We get two healings in this passage. The interesting thing is the location. Up to this point, most of Jesus’ ministry was in Galilee, which is a Jewish region. But Jesus leaves and goes north into Gentile country. The timing is significant. Jesus does this immediately after condemning the scribes and Pharisees for elevating their traditions to divine doctrines. And the point of many of those traditions was to keep themselves from being defiled by the Gentiles. But Jesus condemns their traditions, and then he goes on vacation among the Gentiles.

At first he tried not to be noticed, but a woman noticed him. This woman’s little daughter had an unclean spirit, also known as a demon. So the mother came and begged Jesus to cast the demon out. At first, Jesus’ response seems harsh. He says, “**Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs**” (7:27). By this Jesus means that the Israelites are the children, and the Gentiles, including this woman and her demon-possessed daughter, are dogs (cf. Matt. 15:24). Literally, the word is “little dogs.” In the ancient world there were wild dogs and there were house dogs. Jesus is talking about house dogs. We could even translate it as “puppies.” But it’s still insulting. Why would Jesus say this? He’s fishing for something. He knows this woman, and he sees her faith, so he wants to lead her to the point where she confesses it.

And she does. She picks up on this thing about being a house dog or a puppy, and that’s enough for her. She says, “Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs” (7:28). She understood more than many of the Jews. She knows that the messianic reign of God is not just for the Jews, but for the whole world. Under the old covenant, the people of the world were divided into Israelites and Gentiles, but even the Gentiles remained the Lord’s. The salvation God was working out through the nation of Israel would be for the whole world.

And this is the response of faith Jesus was fishing for. It’s not that Jesus needs to hear it. He already knows it. But the woman needs to hear herself say it. She’s okay with being a dog, as long as she is Jesus’ dog, and the crumbs that fall from his table are enough for her. That is her response of faith.

In the end, Jesus does not treat her as a dog, but as a child. He says, “**For this statement you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter**” (7:29). This is one of the more remarkable healings in Jesus’ ministry. He doesn’t even go to the girl. He simply declares that the demon has

left. Jesus has the divine power to heal from a distance, and he has the divine knowledge to know that it worked. The mother also takes Jesus at his word. She doesn't say, "Come with me, just to make sure." She believes Jesus, she goes home, and she finds it to be true.

The second miracle occurs when Jesus goes to the region of the Decapolis. The word Decapolis means "Ten cities." This was another Gentile region. It was east of Galilee. And there Jesus encounters a deaf and mute man. Someone, probably friends or family, brought him to Jesus. What Jesus does with him is interesting. He took him away privately. Jesus is not interested in making a show. This is just for the deaf and mute man. First he touched his ears and tongue in order to communicate what he was about to do. Remember, this man is deaf and mute. He can't hear what people are saying about Jesus, so he likely has no idea who Jesus is. He can't even speak to ask questions about what's going on. So Jesus signals what he is about to do. Then Jesus speaks. It's funny, of course, that Jesus heals a deaf man by speaking to him. We kind of want to say, "Hey Jesus, he can't hear you. Oh. Wait. Never mind. I guess he can now." Jesus says, "Ephphatha." That's an Aramaic word. It means, "Be opened." Whenever the New Testament preserves the Aramaic words that Jesus spoke, it's a point of emphasis. It indicates that these words are important. In this case, there was healing power in the word "Ephphatha." I suppose it was also the first word this man heard. Imagine never hearing anything. And then, suddenly, you hear a voice say, "Be opened." You would never forget that sound.

"His ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly" (7:35). It's interesting that when Jesus heals people, he also gives them the ability to use their newly restored body parts. Like when lame people are healed, they also know how to walk. When this deaf and mute man is healed, he can understand language and he knows how to use his tongue. It takes children years to learn how to speak. And if, for some reason, a person never learns how to speak as a child, they probably never will, at least not proficiently. So part of the miracle is that Jesus gave the man knowledge and skill.

Both of these miracles are cases of poverty. I'm not really talking about financial poverty, although it's quite likely that the mother of the demon-possessed girl and especially the deaf-mute man were both poor in that sense. But we're talking about poverty in a broader sense. To be poor simply means that we lack something. The girl was oppressed by a demon. She lacked freedom. The man's ears and mouth were poor. He lacked the ability to hear and speak. When we confess that we are poor sinners, we don't mean that we don't have much money. We mean that we lack righteousness. We mean that we are in a miserable condition. And our only hope is the mercy of God.

Jesus came for poor sinners. That's who we are. We confess it. We are poor sinners. We lack righteousness. That's the thing we don't have. Jesus came to make us whole. Like the demon-possessed girl and the deaf-mute man, Jesus comes to make us whole. That is, he gives us his own righteousness. In order to do this, he takes our poverty upon himself. He goes to the cross to suffer the death our poverty deserves. And by his death, a transfer occurs, where, just as he has taken our poverty, in its place, he gives to us his riches. His riches are his righteousness, so that we might inherit his entire kingdom. He came to heal and lift up weak and poor sinners, so that, by his blood, we might become wealthy in righteousness. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.