

## **“Reluctance and Revelation”**

Isaiah 56:1-8; Mark 7:24-37 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – September 8, 2024

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that our hearts might be stretched wide by the compassionate pull of your Holy Spirit. In Jesus' name, we pray, Amen.*

---

We spent the whole month of July focused on Jesus being human. There's a lot there to unpack – a lot that we can learn about God, a lot to consider as we discern who we believe Jesus to be, and a lot to learn about ourselves. So, you know, a month was a solid investment. But here he goes again. And this time, Jesus is being human in ways that aren't particularly flattering – to him or to us. But it is very human.

It seems there is an ancient and constant tension between what humans want to do with our faith and what God wants us to do with it. We have this urge to make religion about boundaries: who is in and who is out, what the requirements are and what the penalties for not meeting them are, who belongs by virtue of birth and who shouldn't even bother applying for membership. God, on the other hand, is continually, has been continually, will continue to continue stretching the limits far beyond all the barriers and tests we try to enforce. Foreigners? Welcome! Eunuchs? Welcome! Syrophoenician women? Welcome! And we are left standing with our mouths open, in the good company of Jesus, saying, “Wait, what?”

People have struggled with this story about Jesus refusing to help this woman's daughter for ages, because it really doesn't make him look good at all. Rationalizations

insisting he was just testing her or that he was using it as a “teaching moment” for the disciples witnessing it abound. But I love this story just as it is, because if we take it at face value – that is, if we accept that Jesus had his perspective shifted, broadened by this woman desperately seeking help – it is one of the very best lessons in what it means to be faithfully human in the whole gospel. To be faithfully human is to be open to the truth that God is constantly looking for ways to stretch our hearts a little wider. To be faithfully human is to recognize that God is going to continually surprise us with implications for our faith beyond all our imaginings. To be faithfully human is to understand that just when we think we’ve got it all figured out, God is going to come at us from a totally unexpected direction and prod us into a whole new way of looking at love. If it happened to Jesus, why would we think it wouldn’t happen to us? Rather than being embarrassed for him, perhaps we should look around and see how we could learn similar lessons as well as he did.

What’s interesting about what God is doing in both these passages is that there was no need to go looking in exotic, faraway places for the people who needed to be welcomed in; they were right there. The foreigners and eunuchs that God wanted to clarify were as welcome as anyone else were already in Jerusalem. That was the whole point: here are these people, you are treating them like second class citizens; they are not, so let me be clear: they are welcome, I receive their gifts with joy, I remember them with honor; let no one say they do not belong.

Now perhaps we do wonder why Jesus didn't remember this lesson centuries later when confronted by this mother desperately seeking healing for her daughter. But in his defense, the lesson from Isaiah 56 was that those foreigners and eunuchs – who honored the sabbath and held fast the covenant – has been welcomed into his faith. This woman wasn't offering to convert before getting what she needed; she needed it now. This kind of extension of his ministry apparently hadn't been covered during that harrowing orientation Jesus went through in the wilderness. Was it allowed? Was it a good idea? Was it why he was here? Was it the call of God? He was cautious, not sending her immediately away, but inviting her into a debate. Coming from a rabbi, that's almost offering her a seat at the table. And when she rose to the occasion, responding with conviction of her own worth and her daughter's need, couched as it was in the language of his opening statement, Jesus recognized the movement of the Holy Spirit breaking his ministry open a little wider. The woman got what she wanted, the girl was released from her torment, and Jesus was left, well, how do you think he was doing after that?

It's so interesting to me how this story leads into the next. He decided to get out of town, almost as if he was a bit unnerved. And then he's presented with another healing opportunity. This situation apparently requires a more hands-on approach, but he does it all, sticking his fingers in ears, spitting, touching a tongue, but he didn't want to talk about it. It was so astonishing nobody could help talking about it, but it's almost as if Jesus himself needed some time to process just how much bigger this whole thing was than he had expected.

Out of Jesus' reluctance, came revelation. He wasn't quite ready for where the Spirit was guiding his ministry, but he followed and amazing things happened. Surprising things, glorious unexpected things, apple-cart-upsetting things. Just by letting go of his reluctance and opening God's love to the person right in front of him.

Could we be like that? Who is right in front of us? Who is in our midst, yet we hardly see them, because of our assumptions that they're not really part of our community? There are dozens of people that come through this building in a given week or month, yet only some of them are seen as "us." What would happen if we allowed that distinction to dissolve in our hearts and minds? What would happen if we opened ourselves to the lessons these neighbors could teach us? We want to grow, and yet we are still hampered by a variety of reluctances. What sorts of revelations are we keeping from ourselves by giving into that hesitation? Who are the people in our community who have given up even asking for crumbs because they've been told for so long that they can only ever hope to be a second-class citizen in the kingdom of God? What could happen if we proclaimed this good news to them? That they are welcome, invited, needed, so that our community can be more full of joy and honor and love?

Let us decide this day that this church will be "a house of prayer for all peoples," that there will be no second-class citizens here, only fully beloved children of God, with equal access to compassion, healing, mercy and ministry. May the Holy Spirit transform our reluctance into revelation, that God's ever-widening love might flow like mighty waters. Hallelujah and Amen.