

"Working Overtime."

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23; Ps. 125;

Mark 7: 24-37

Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church

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Since it is Labor Day Weekend, I'd like to give each of you an imaginary job. You are part of the group that had the job of deciding what gets included or left out of the Bible. You'd be working overtime, to be sure. What stories would make the cut? Which ones would get dropped? When would you be sure the Holy Spirit was speaking and when would you wonder whether these were just human words? A daunting task, to say the least.

There are so many stories to choose from. Remember that John, the gospel writer, ends his Gospel by saying this: "...there are many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written!" (21:25). Now that's a bit of an exaggeration perhaps, but it points to the fact that John had to be an editor as well as a chronicler of the life of Jesus.

We also know there are gospels written by others and attributed to such people as Philip, Mary, Thomas and Peter -- "gospels" that didn't make the cut when the Bible was put together. Why?

Maybe they emphasized the humanness of Jesus too much. Maybe they highlighted his supernatural powers too much. Maybe they had him saying and doing things that embarrassed the early church. Maybe they weren't "orderly" enough.

Luke begins his Gospel in this manner: "Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that

have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account..."

(1:1-3)

The gospel writers are stewards of the story and they had much material to consider. They each gave their own flavor and personality to their account of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Deciding what to include and what to omit was an awesome responsibility.

So now the editorial team you are on looks at the Gospel of Mark. You have Mark's story of the life and ministry of Jesus in front of you. You start reading verse 1... "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'""(1:1-3) So far, so good.

Mark continues: "John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness..." "Hey, wait a minute," you might say, "where is the manger and the wise men?" They are not there. There's no Christmas story in Mark.

But the baptism of Jesus is there. So is the feeding of the 5,000. Should they be in or out? In? Ok. Jesus walking on water? In? Ok. The Syrophenician woman? ... This story doesn't exactly cast Jesus in a favorable light. Would you include it or not?

Would you want Jesus to come off as someone who couldn't be bothered by a person in need, someone who could call someone

else a "dog"? Would you want to see Jesus as someone who saw his ministry as exclusively for the children of Israel and not for the world? If so, then what happens to the great commission and the call to go into all the world and preach the gospel?

Would you want Jesus to sound so snippy and downright hostile? Would you then want the incarnate God to appear to waffle and change his mind? If that is ok with you, then what do we do with the affirmation we hear in the book of Hebrews: "Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today and forever?" (13:8)

Would you want Jesus to be beaten in an argument and admit defeat and be beaten by a woman, no less? If so, then what happens to the patriarchal view of Jesus' day, (a view that is also held by many today and is often based on their interpretation of the Bible), a point of view that has little room for women's opinions and voice, much less their leadership and authority?

As a member of that early Christian editorial board, how would you deal with this story from Mark's Gospel in light of the prevailing patriarchal audience of the day?

Even assuming that the story is true and did in fact happen, would you be honor bound to include it in the Gospel? And if so, why?

What if this story is here to show how even Jesus was open to having his mind changed? Maybe this story begs the question: if he can change his mind and move toward including this outsider, shouldn't the church of Jesus Christ do the same and welcome the stranger and the alien?

This is a tough story... a troubling story. But it is also a story of hope, especially for non-Jews like most of us.

Perhaps this story is here to show how we too must have courage to come before God and to ask for help, even if it means working overtime in our prayers and our petitions.

Notice that the woman does not argue whether Jesus' first responsibility is to the children of Israel. She agrees. But she also opens the door to a worldview that we would do well to consider.

This story might be viewed as a reminder that the world God has made is a world of abundance, not scarcity. The woman stakes her claim to the scraps, knowing that even the scraps that fall from God's table are enough for her and for her child and for us all.

This outsider, this dog, this Syrophenician woman, opens the way to the table for us. She is the one who makes sure that outsiders like us also have a place in the kingdom of God.

St. Paul follows in her footsteps! He builds upon her courageous foundation. His teachings about the all-inclusive nature of the church and the all-encompassing breadth of God's grace appear in places like Galatians 3:28 as he affirms: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus".

As the church of Jesus Christ we hear his invitation: "Come unto me all you who labor and are heavily burdened, and I will give you rest." We too affirm the all-inclusive nature of Christ's church. We are open to all who put their trust in him. We open the doors of Chapel Lane and the doors of our hearts saying, "Welcome in the name of Jesus Christ."

And so we are invited to begin again, to recommit ourselves to the tasks of ministry here in this place, to decide to engage in challenging study, warm fellowship, life-giving mission and personal renewal. And we gather, not as outsiders, not as strangers, not as those who snuck under the fence, but as children of God who will come from east and west and north and south and sit together at table in the kingdom of God.

In a day and age when we are constantly told to be on guard, to fear the outsider and the alien, to be watchful and cautious, the church of Jesus Christ has an important message to proclaim: the message of openness and welcome to the stranger, the outcast, the alien...in the name of Christ and for Christ's sake.

Thanks be to God, and let all God's people say, "Amen."