

**Mark 7: 24 - 37**

**Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 18 B**

**September 8, 2024**

**The Rev. Katherine Bush**

One of the reasons we come to church is to be reminded of what we believe. Worshiping together is a regular refresher course on what we hold true about God and this mixed-up world and even what we believe about ourselves. When I'm done up here, the very next thing that will happen is that all of us will stand up and say, "We believe in God." The practice of naming what we believe is meant, of course, not simply to be a memorization drill we go through once a week, but a regrounding as preparation for living like believers all week long. And when we say what we believe, we are also, by default, saying what we do not believe. Maybe not out loud. The creed is not full of corollary unbelief statements. But implicitly, when we invite everyone to come to the table, we disavow exclusion. When we receive the message of forgiveness, we reject the barrage of messages that would have us believe that it's too late or that we are broken beyond repair. When we read this old book full of wisdom and strangeness, we abandon the idea that truth can only be found in neat and pat and tidy stories.

And in this old book today, we hear the story of a woman who is quite possibly having the worst day and the best day of her life. Years ago, Dr. Mitzi Minor was talking about this story of the determined mother, an outsider bent on saving her daughter. Mitzi said something like this ... *she was a woman who did not believe what they told her about a woman's place, a woman's voice, the worth of her daughter. She was a woman who did not believe that God's love had ethnic boundaries. She did not believe that there was a finite amount of grace to go around.* Now, she didn't approach Jesus and announce these unbeliefs, but her every word and every action demonstrated what she did not believe and what she did. She believed that Jesus could rescue her daughter and that she and her daughter were worth rescuing. She believes this even when, in a shocking response, Jesus calls her a dog and challenges her value and seems to reject the idea that there is enough mercy to go around.

So, we need to stop here for a minute and consider what we believe about Jesus and what we do not believe about Jesus. And maybe we need to try to figure out what Jesus believes about himself and his own mission in the world. There are some reflexive explanations for this ugly scene: maybe he was testing her, maybe he was using commonly held bigoted language to call out the prejudice. Maybe he was tired. Maybe in his limited humanity, he lost sight of the expansive reach of his divinity. Maybe the teacher had to be taught, or at least reminded of the larger vision of God's grace and love. He does seem a quick study. Jesus immediately recognizes the wisdom and the courageous hope of this defiant woman standing in front of him, and he changes his mind and commends her outspokenness and heals her daughter. None of these turns has to mean that we believe in

a diminished Jesus, but rather that we can believe in the possibility that God is not unchanging nor unresponsive, but ultimately is compassionate and merciful in abundance.

It is a tricky thing that we Christians profess to believe in Jesus' full humanity and his simultaneous full divinity. We'll say this out loud too though in a few moments - first that Jesus is "God from God, Light from Light," and then that "he became incarnate," that is that he was a little baby born to a woman who grew up and was killed. We believe that Jesus is God, all-knowing, all-powerful, and a human limited by what the human mind can understand and susceptible in some moments to the constraints of humanity's stingier compassion. Jesus seems to believe at first that the food, the gift, that he was offering to the world was really only for certain people at certain tables. But in the face of her desperate hope and self-immolating love, he shakes that belief off - he un-believes in the limits and restrictions. And he believes - for the first time or all over again - in the wideness, the increase, the expansion of God's indiscriminate love.

There's a lot to sit with and wonder about in this exchange. There's a lot to believe and not to believe. You certainly don't have to believe my wayward thoughts. But it's a good practice, and maybe another good reason to come to church, to pay attention to what we say we believe. And from time to time to think about what we do not believe, or what we used to believe but not anymore, or what we need to start the process of unbelieving in. Like the messages we hear about our precarious standing in the world. Like the belief that we must constantly prove our worth. That faithful people are always quiet-types. That women don't belong in certain rooms. That God doesn't care about certain individuals or whole groups of people. That God never changes, which Scott reminded us a few weeks ago, is a limited take on the nature of the Divine. And then there's that troublesome idea that we can't change, that it's too late, or that we're broken beyond repair. Turns out there's a pretty long list of things we could bear to stop believing in.

Thank goodness for this unnamed patron saint of unbelief: a woman who believed so wholeheartedly in the wide and merciful embrace of God that she shed countless other beliefs. She left behind ideas about whose voices get to be heard and who gets to talk back. She did not believe in the boundaries of ethnicity nor even of propriety. She did not accept that there was only so much grace to go around. She did believe in Jesus, maybe she believed more in Jesus than Jesus believed in this moment. She believed healing was possible and that she and her daughter were worth fighting for. She believed that change was possible for someone like herself and for this mixed-up world and for God.

What about us? What do we believe in these days? And what do you and I not believe? This is not just a philosophical exercise, and it's not just for mindless recitation. What we believe and don't believe will ground us and reshape our lives. What we believe and do not believe will color our choices, our hopes, and our loves. Our unbeliefs and our beliefs will send us into new places to find God, give us the courage to insist upon our belonging, grant us the capacity to believe in healing for ourselves and for others in our wake and maybe for this whole mixed-up world.