



# Poland Presbyterian Church

*At the Green since 1802*

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A Sermon by Brent J. Eelman

## ***Let the Children Be Fed***

### **Mark 7:24-37**

*From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice,<sup>25</sup> but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet.<sup>26</sup> Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.<sup>27</sup> He said to her, 'Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.'<sup>28</sup> But she answered him, 'Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.'<sup>29</sup> Then he said to her, 'For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.'<sup>30</sup> So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.*

*31 Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis.<sup>32</sup> They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him.<sup>33</sup> He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue.<sup>34</sup> Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, 'Ephphatha', that is, 'Be opened.'<sup>35</sup> And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.<sup>36</sup> Then Jesus\* ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it.<sup>37</sup> They were astounded beyond measure, saying, 'He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.'*

My message is about church priorities. Poland Presbyterian Church can't do everything and be everything that people want us to be. What are our priorities?

1. This morning I want to examine the dynamics of how a woman's challenge changed the scope of Jesus' ministry.
2. Then I want to look at PPC's priorities. As we return from vacation, and begin this programmatic year, what are our priorities?
3. I will conclude by reflecting on where PPC is now as a congregation and will challenge its priorities for the coming years.

### I

Mark described the woman as a Syrophenician. She was not Jewish. She was a Greek. Her daughter was ill and she came seeking Jesus for his healing powers. In Mark's Gospel, this was a defining moment in Jesus' ministry. How would Jesus respond to a non-Jew? We might be shocked at his initial response because it borders on insulting.

"Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." The "children" were the children of Israel. In effect Jesus was saying, "My ministry is to my people. It would not be fair to them if I healed your daughter." Was he testing her? Was he verbally

probing to measure her faith? We don't know, but the Syrophenician woman stood her ground with Jesus, telling him that even dogs get the crumbs that fall from the table. When she returned home, her daughter was healed... but more importantly for us, the mission of Christ was broadened and not merely focused on "his people".

We often forget that Jesus was a Jew. He was raised in a Jewish home. All indications are that he kept kosher. He quoted the Hebrew Bible. He preached in synagogues. He spoke Aramaic. He was, through and through, a Jew. His encounter with this Greek woman challenged the scope of his ministry and mission. It was no longer limited to taking care of "his own people: the children of Israel". Mark stated clearly, it was universal in scope.

I believe that the Syrophenician woman brings the same challenge congregations, (the continuing Body of Christ) today. Are we all about ourselves and "our people." Will we allow ourselves to turn inward and only take care of our own, or are we willing to broaden our priorities.

## II

During this past year, a committee of this congregation developed a "mission study". This study examined PPC's history and where we are now. It also states what PPC's priorities should be as a congregation going forward. This was not an easy task, because within a congregation as diverse as this, there will be different priorities. There is a tension among the competing demands and expectations of a congregation. When a congregation has limited resources, (and all congregations do!), how do we use those resources? Is taking care of our members more important than reaching out to potential new ones?

Jesus' encounter with the Syrophenician woman challenges us to move beyond our own parochialism. It challenges us to ask the hard questions about who we are, and whom we serve.

- Are we merely a spiritual "health club" that meets the spiritual needs of its members? -OR-
- Are we part of a global movement that clings to a vision of the transformation of society?
- How do we deal with the tension of being good stewards of this property, the need for good programming, and the challenges of a changing neighborhood and world?
- Today, as we kick off our Sunday School year, we also must wrestle with the question of "are we giving our children the food they need?"
- How are we fulfilling the vows that we took before God to nurture our children at the time of their baptism?

## III

I want to challenge PPC's priorities. We are two weeks into the college football schedule. This year there are a number of schools with new coaches who brought with them new ideas, formations and approaches to the game. Some are succeeding, but many are having difficulty. Why? They don't have the types of players that they need for their program. In other words: good coaches should begin with what they have.

The same is true with congregations. We need to begin with the players we have and develop a mission and ministry based upon the gifts that God has given us. Not the gifts we wish we had! Remember: Jesus fed the 5,000 with what he had, 2 fish and a dozen loaves. He did not whine

about what he wished he had. I think that the biggest mistake we clergy make is to fail to take into consideration the gifts God has given to our congregations.... Pursuing instead, some generic vision of what a church should be that we read in the latest pastoral "how to" book.

We need to begin with the gifts God has given us. Here is what PPC has:

1. We are intelligent and educated. It is a value that we have. We think about things. We study. We send our children to school. We listen to public radio. We enjoy books, entertainment, and social events that cause us to think. We value education. PPC gives an amazing amount to its members who go on to higher education through scholarships. Very few churches do that. PPC values education and intelligence.
2. We have a beautiful facility. I know we think it could be nicer, and we are addressing some of the maintenance issues, but we need to offer thanks for previous generations who sacrificed to build this campus and then leave it to us.
3. We have a location. In real estate the maxim is "location, location, location." It is important for congregations also. This location is prime. We have amazing curb appeal. People don't have to look to find the building.
4. PPC has tradition. Over 200 years of it! They weren't all good years, but we are still here, and in better shape than most organizations this old both ecclesiastical and otherwise. Tradition still counts and our history is a strength.
5. PPC has critical mass. There people here. There is an endowment. There is a facility. The challenge is: will PPC leverage its assets to achieve its mission? There is a relationship between reward and risk. Jesus always emphasized mission over maintenance. Faith does not exist where there is no risk!
6. There is one other gift that we have, that we often forget and that is prayer, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. That is a gift that has been given to all of us and is the most important gift. PPC needs to be a praying, risking, believing community of 21<sup>st</sup> century disciples.

We need to take what God has given us and use faithfully. I believe that our ministry grows out of the gifts that God has bestowed upon us. We need to use the loaves and fishes that we have, and stop whining about what we don't have, and get to work. This is the challenge that I see for PPC. Time permits me only to underscore three... there are many more.

1. The world needs Christians who think: Christians who question and are not afraid to wrestle with their doubts. The world does not need more people who blindly follow some glib guru to perdition, it needs thinking people of faith, who hear the call of Christ, even in the complexities of this post-modern world. The world needs smart Christians who are versed in the sacred texts of the bible but also science, economics, history, literature, technology, language and other areas of knowledge. This is why Presbyterians have started colleges and universities throughout the country. PPC needs to be a place where people of faith gather who are not afraid of growing intellectually and spiritually in the faith. When we enter this building we should park our cars outside, but not our brains!
2. We need to understand that the most crucial program in the life of this congregation is its Christian Education program. Notice: I said Christian Education program, not Sunday School. Here is the reality: Sunday has become one more day of the week. Businesses are open.

Sports events have scheduled heavily on Sundays. We can wring our hands and cry into our towels about this, but it is not going to change. **Thriving congregations adapt.** They also offer high quality educational events that parents and others will make a priority. But we cannot hire someone to run it and believe we have taken care of it. Christian Education is the responsibility of every member here. When we baptize a child, we respond to the question: *“Do you, as members of the church of Jesus Christ, promise to guide, nurture, and encourage this child, by word and deed, with love?”*

We answer that question in the presence of God... and I believe we are accountable to God for fulfilling that sacred vow. If the children are to be fed first.... Education is the primary responsibility of the entire congregation!

3. We should wear our history proudly. Churches relate to history and tradition in one of two ways. Some congregations allow their history to shackle them to ways of doing things and a vision that is no longer valid. It literally becomes the albatross around their neck, keeping them wed to the past, not faithful to God’s call in Christ.

The other option is for history and tradition to be a springboard empowering us to the future. History is the story of change and adaptation. We need to study it, understand it, and then move forward, recognizing that we too, are making history. Will our history be worth remembering?

Vacation is over. We now face the challenge of our priorities. The story of Jesus encounter with the Syrophenician woman broadened his vision of his mission. “Let the children be fed first...” was broadened to include all the children of the world, even ours. The challenge for us is to broaden our understanding of the gifts that God has given us, and all God’s children whom we are called to feed. Amen.