

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

Mark 7:24-37

Isaiah 35:4-7a

Psalm 146

James 2:1-10,14-17

September 5, 2021

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Before I begin my sermon this morning, I want to say this one was hard to write. I had so many things on my heart this week as we approach the 20th anniversary of 9/11 and at the same time we have withdrawn our troops from Afghanistan. Too many lives have been lost and so many of us are left wondering how to make sense of the tragedy, the fighting, the future.

What I want to offer this morning is how I am trying to understand it all and offer to you one way to move forward.

As many of you know, I serve as a Chaplain for the Goochland County Fire and Rescue. It's an honor beyond measure and this year, I have been helping pull together our annual 9/11 Service of Remembrance. My task...select 4 biographies of those who died to be read at the service. 4 individuals...out of thousands.

I read biography after biography. Words written by loved ones to try and put the essence of a beautiful life into words.

Jack Aron, 52, worked in information technology at Marsh & McLennan, leaving before dawn and traveling by car, train and ferry so he could be home in Bergenfield, N.J., in time to coach his son's Little League and basketball games.

Gerard Barbara, 53, a 31-year veteran of the Fire Department, was one of the city's highest-ranking supervisors. His son commented that people he had never seen before were coming up to him after his father was killed saying, 'You don't understand, I loved your dad,' and the son would reply, "I do understand, he was my dad!"

When she got home from her job in the cafeteria at Cantor Fitzgerald, Tawanna Griffin, who was 30, doted on her 5-year-old son, Bobby Jr., and when the weekend came, home was the only place she really wanted to be.

Though not yet engaged, Matthew Horning and his girlfriend were planning a life together. She wanted four children; he talked her down to three. He wanted her to walk down the aisle to the "Star Wars" theme. She said, "We'll see."

Words. Overflowing words of life. Life that demands to be known. Life, that even in the midst of such deep grief and loss, forced its way through so that people would remember the beautiful sparks of energy and love that once walked this earth. Life that would not give up living, if not in the flesh, at least in our hearts.

He was soft-spoken. She was a real city-girl. He was an ever-lasting friend. She had a sustaining relationship with joy.

So much hope. So much love. So much life.

It made me realize that life will always seek to be known. And so it is with the Syrophenician woman in our Gospel reading this morning. The woman who was determined to have her life and her daughter's life known by Jesus. Her refusal to be silenced was a profound reminder as I read those bios that her unapologetic demand to be seen is something we all hold within us. And even in the depths of her pain and suffering that spark of life ignited a movement within her...a movement to claim healing for her daughter. Because her little girl's life mattered. And that mother was not going to give up until she was seen.

Jesus, at first, seems to ignore the value of this woman's life...and the life of her daughter. The words that we read this morning are hard to hear...Jesus tells her in essence that she isn't worth his time. He has other priorities to fulfill, other people to take care of. The people he has chosen to matter first and foremost.

But, she refuses to accept his dismissal. She refuses to accept that her life is anything other than valuable. And I want you to notice something so beautiful in this story...her strength, her determination, caused Jesus to stop and listen and notice. It made Jesus rethink the value (or lack thereof) he had placed on her life. And then, he began to let her life emerge as a powerful and transformative force.

Her desire to be known transformed Jesus. Because she demanded to be heard, Jesus listened. And because Jesus listened, as he let the words of her life grow within his heart, he understood something much bigger than that one encounter. He saw the true grace that comes from honoring life...in all of its forms, in all people, in all times. True grace that erases boundaries and builds bridges and calls forth the best within us.

When he leaves the Syrophenician woman Jesus continues to heal, to feed, and to defend. His ministry grew and expanded to become something so great, so expansive, that it has become for the world the bedrock of how we now understand the value of life for every single human being...without boundaries, without hate, without prejudice.

In a commencement speech at Dartmouth College in June 2002, Mr. Rogers (the pillar of neighborly love) shared what kind of future he was hoping for. He said, *"When I say it's you I like, I'm talking about that part of you that knows that life is far more than anything you can ever see or hear or touch. That deep part of you that allows you to stand for those things without which humankind cannot survive. Love that conquers hate, peace that rises triumphant over war, and justice that proves more powerful than greed."*

I believe Mr. Rogers was talking about the life that demands to be known. And if we take anything from the tragedy we remember this week, if we take anything from war and division and sacrifice, it's that each and every life has value beyond measure. Jesus teaches us to look beyond our division and our difference to build something better...for those we have lost, for those we fight for today and for those that will come after us in the generations to come.

Life will always demand to be known. It's up to us to listen.

Amen.