

Mark 7:24-37

The Church In the World

September 8, 2024

Back in the year 2,000 my family went on vacation to see Mt. Rushmore, and camped at a place called Custer State Park in South Dakota. It was in the time of the Sturgis Rally and there were bikers everywhere. There was the sound of motorcycles revving their engines and the sight of them parked by the hundreds in every parking lot.

It turns out that the entire month of August is festival month in Edinburgh, Scotland. There are theatre and comedy groups; there are book and writer festivals, as well as music and dance. One of the festivals is called, "The Fringe," and involves street performers such as jugglers and clowns and people with all different kinds of circus-like abilities, and some of them are a little edgy in their presentations.

The city was filled up with people, adding to the tourism centered environment, that was filled up with people to begin with. So this is the second time I have gone on a trip to a place with a festival when, to be honest, I wasn't going for the festival, but just to go.

Wherever I go, I always make a point to look for the churches, to see where they are and to attend if I am around on a Sunday morning. There are several churches in the Old City, as they call it, of Edinburgh, and certainly many more scattered around the larger metropolitan area. The one that stands out just down the hill from the castle, is called St. Giles Cathedral.

It is a congregation of the Church of Scotland and worships in a building that is around 5-7 hundred years old, although this past Sunday, they celebrated their 900th anniversary. For many, the main attraction is the building itself, with the medieval architectural features and marvelous stained-glass all around.

People come in to see it at the rate of about 1.3 million per year. At noon each day they have a small prayer service with some scripture for the people making their way through.

They are open everyday except Sunday when they are ironically closed for worship. It sounds funny but it makes sense. On Sunday mornings they close the building to the sight-seeing public to let the worshippers in.

The service was beautiful. It was presbyterian style (after all, this is the mother church of the Presbyterian movement, John Knox was once its pastor) with Scottish hymns I did not know. I am not sure they have never heard of Fanny Crosby there. I must say I was a little surprised that the sound of the organ echoing through the cavernous room was surpassed by the sound of the choir, which must be heard to be believed.

The preacher preached a sermon about commitment from the text in Joshua:

"14 "Now therefore fear the Lord and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that

your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. 15 And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, *we will serve the Lord.*”

All the while the Fringe was going on right outside the church’s doors; flame throwing jugglers or machete jugglers balanced on top of 16 foot extension ladders on the cobbled streets in the forty mph winds (it really was kind of impressive, they managed somehow not to fall down).

It was the church, but it was the church *in* the world, which is where we find Jesus in the gospel reading for the day. There are two encounters; the first with a Greek woman from Syrian Phoenicia, and the other in the region of the Decapolis which is on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee, where Jesus was encountered by a man who was deaf and barely able to speak.

In order to understand either or both of these stories, it is helpful to consider the regional designations that accompany them. Syrian Phoenicia is Lebanon today. In their history it was the region of seafaring traders who worked from the port cities of Tyre and Sidon, and made these cities wealthy by comparison to the Jewish towns in Galilee.

The Decapolis was the region to the east of the Jordan river where the Herodian prince Philip governed, and the Romans had established ten cities where people from the European west migrated, giving the region a very Gentile feel. As a matter of fact, it is safest to say there are two characterizations these places bring to the story; they were gentile, and more affluent.

Thus the response of Jesus to the woman’s plea for help. He told her no. At first he sees her as a resented foreigner. But after she refuses to let him off the hook with her, “even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the table . . .” he sees her as a human being, a mother concerned for her child.

And he sees her faith, which surprises him. In the end he helps her by healing her daughter. In this encounter Jesus models for us how we might respond when we are in similar situations, encountered by people from other places, sometimes exotic, but capable of humanity, in the good sense of the word, and faith as well.

Thus also the response to the man born deaf and unable to speak. While Jesus’ means was certainly not as sanitary as we might like nowadays, Jesus gives a life back to this man; an opportunity to hear and to understand the word of God’s love and grace, and to hear the word of forgiveness, and then to become a proclaimer himself, of the redeeming love of God.

Both of these characters represent God’s love for and grace to “others,” the generic, “other,” that we at one

and the same time are . . . we are the descendants of the Gentiles . . . and also that we know are gentiles to us. To his surprise, Jesus finds faith in this woman and this man, just as he also finds faith in us.

Of course, he tells them not to tell anyone about it, but it doesn't do any good. The more he exhorts them to silence, the more they talk about it. It is the twofold responsibility of the church in the world, the family, or community of the redeemed, to recognize God's mercy at work in us, and to proclaim it to others, even if they are strange to us, like the performers at The Fringe.

Certainly, we are not in the same precise situation as they are at St. Giles, but more generally we face the same scenario, just as did Jesus 2,000 years ago, and Paul and the other believers after that and ever since. We live in a sometimes hostile culture.

The world fails to notice God's presence and resists faith. We ourselves, sometimes are tempted not to see and not to believe. We are encouraged by these stories of healing on the grounds that healing itself is one of the ways God is "revealed" to us.

And further, we are both challenged and assured when we read about Jesus in encounters with some of the people around him; and we also live with people all around who are foreign to us. We are accepted. They are accepted.

And even furthermore, we live in an age of skepticism, disillusionment, confusion; what some have called the, "malaise of modernity," a general feeling of discomfort, a lack of well-being, a sense that things are headed in the wrong direction; that seems to have afflicted us all. We stand, nonetheless, with all the people of faith as a witness to the love of God.

In addition to the sometimes healing of the body and the mind, and the experience of the forgiveness, which at one time of another we all have needed and known, the gospel offers deliverance from the malaise, as it is sometimes called, even while we are still in the world.

Our lives are showered with the significance of the small things, and sometimes of the work of God in the disillusion and skepticism. pointing us in the direction of salvation, of healing and restoration, clarity in the confusion. We are the church in the world, and when we have experiences of God's grace and power . . . good luck keeping us silent.

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