

Mark 7:24-37/Sept. 5, 2021

Grace and peace be with you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Who here has ever asked for a sign from God? Anyone?

What did you need a sign about?

For me, the last time I asked for a sign was when I was trying to decide what seminary to go to back in 2003.

Once I decided to go to seminary, I imagined myself going to California, to Pacific Lutheran Seminary. I thought – this is a perfect excuse to live in California for a few years. Fun!

But, my home congregation, Advent in Westminster, had always had interns from Gettysburg in Pennsylvania, so my former pastor was shocked that I wouldn't automatically go to Gettysburg. But, I really wanted to go to California. So, to appease him I told him I would visit both campuses before making my decision.

I went to California first and it was nice. I enjoyed myself. But, it was a complicated and expensive place to live. And, being in Berkley across the bay from San Francisco, it was also more damp than I was imagining. But, I still enjoyed it there.

Then, I went to Gettysburg. Because we had had so many interns from LTSG, it felt like home. It was very easy being there, and a whole lot less expensive.

If you have ever been to Gettysburg, the seminary is on day 1 of the battlefield tour. General Lee took over the cupola in the main seminary building for his look out.

Unlike the bustling city of Berkley, Gettysburg is small town east coast rural, nice and quiet.

Up until my visit to the burg, I had already made my decision. I was going to CA. But, after that visit to PA I was in a stale mate. One minute I would be – CA. Then next I would be - PA. I went back and forth and back and forth for weeks. I drove the poor admissions guy crazy at PLTS.

And then one night I prayed before I went to sleep. “Lord, this whole seminary thing wasn’t my idea in the first place, so you tell me which seminary to go to. Give me a sign.”

And so, I went to sleep. And, I kid you not, at midnight I woke up and I spoke the word “Gettysburg.” And with that, the decision was made. I never questioned it again. Gettysburg it was and I had a fabulous time there, so much so that I decided to continue and get my DMin with them as well.

When we’re in a quandary, it’s nice to get a sign to lead us on our way, isn’t it? It helps us make the decision, unless were not sure that the sign was an actual sign, right? Which may really mean that we have already made our decision and we are just looking for God to agree with us.

But, when we are looking for a sign, most of us would like something unmistakable like lightning bolts or clouds that spell things out for us, but God doesn’t typically act like that. God’s more subtle, working through people. That’s why God came as Jesus.

In Jesus’ day, people were looking for a sign as well - a sign that Jesus was the Messiah - and even though he fed 5000 people off five loaves and two fish, cast out demons, and healed people, for some it was never enough. They always want more, which probably means that they had actually already made up their mind that Jesus wasn’t the Messiah, at least not their idea of the Messiah.

In our reading from Mark today, we once again have Mark comparing two people – a Syrophenician woman who comes by herself to have an unclean spirit cast out of her daughter who is far away versus a bunch of Jewish people who have brought their friend to be healed and ask for Jesus to lay his hands on him.

Now, I want you to notice that in verse 34 Jesus sighs. <sigh> I don't take that to be a good thing. You see, the Jewish people had constantly been demanding signs of Jesus. If you are the Messiah, then do this or that. Prove yourself. Constantly they wanted proof. So Jesus sighs <sigh> and gives them more signs.

He puts on this big production of spitting, sticking his fingers in the man's ears, and touching his tongue, and then yelling – “Be Open!”

But, I don't think that he only meant for the ears and tongue of this one man to be open, but for all of the crowd to be open to the fact that the Messiah, the Savior of the World, was in their midst.

Clearly, Jesus can do healings from far away, he just proved it with the Syrophenician woman, so it wasn't necessary to put on a big show, but the Jews wanted signs, and even with signs some still lacked faith.

But, the Syrophenician woman, on the other hand, had total confidence when she walked up to Jesus, which in itself would have been totally shocking to everyone nearby. This just wasn't done – a foreign woman approaching a Jewish rabbi. Every single cultural norm was being destroyed, especially with her talking first.

And because she had drawn everyone's attention, there is again a show for the crowd to help them see who Jesus is and what true faith looks like, so that they might stop demanding signs from him and just trust God.

So, at first Jesus goes along with what the crowd expects. Healing is just for the Jewish people for whom I came. Everyone in the crowd would be nodding their heads with that – yes, that is correct.

But, she persists by pointing out that Jesus has more than enough to spare. He had just fed 5,000 people with 12 baskets of bread leftover. She knew that he could do anything and that there were no limits to his power, and she wasn't asking for much – just to help her little daughter out – one of the least, last, and lowly.

Now, here is my theory. I think that Jesus had already cast the unclean spirit out of her daughter as soon as she asked for it, but Jesus needed her help teach the crowd a lesson.

Look – this foreigner gets it. Why don't you? But, everyone was probably way too appalled to get anything out of it, so Jesus goes on to heal a man who is deaf and mute, and gives the people what they ask – for him to lay hands on their friend.

And maybe sometimes we are like the friends as well. We want a show, even though we know that God is acting in the midst of us in our everyday lives, usually through a friend or family member, and many times also through a complete stranger. We still want a sign. Are you there God?

The anthropologist, Margaret Mead, was once asked by a student what the first sign of civilized culture is. The student thought she would talk about clay pots or fishing gear. But, instead she said that the first sign of civilization is a healed thigh bone. For animals, if they break a leg bone, they die, because they can no longer hunt or escape from danger. A healed thigh bone is proof that someone has taken care of someone else, and carried them through recovery.

Mead said, "Helping someone through difficulty is where civilization starts. We are at our best when we serve others."

The Kingdom of God takes that a step further. The Kingdom of God has no barriers. There are no insiders or outsiders. No tribes. The Syrophoenician woman's daughter is healed just as the Jewish man is healed.

As Paul says in his letter to the Galatians, in Christ there is no Jew or Gentile, no male or female. God's Kingdom is beyond civilized tribe. It encompasses all people of all time and all places. In the Kingdom of God, there are no barriers to God's love, and thereby there are no boundaries between our love for one another either, because we all are God's beloved family.

In Jesus, God takes all of our human judgments about worthiness and destroys them on the cross. With arms open wide, Jesus welcomes all into God's family. That includes you, me, our friends, our family, and even the strangers we meet on the street. He wraps us all in his embrace and brings us all into God's Kingdom so that it doesn't matter if we are Jewish, Syrophoenician, American, Mexican, Afghani, African, or anything else. All barriers are destroyed and we are called to love one another.

Jesus' death and resurrection is God's ultimate sign, and the only sign that matters.

We have our sign <point to cross>, now is the time for us to be that sign from God for others, to be the sign of God's love by caring for others out in the world <point to door>.

God comes to us and we go out to others <make cross shape – down and then out>. That's your sign.

Thanks be to God. Amen.