

Charge To Vestry

Canon Penny Anderson, 28 February 2021

From there Jesus 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, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. 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.' But she answered him, 'Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.' Then he said to her, 'For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.' So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone. (Mark 7.24-30)

In the name of the Holy and Blessed Trinity. Amen.

On the face of it, Jesus is not complimenting the woman whose daughter suffers with an unclean spirit. She's a Gentile. Jesus refers to her and her people as dogs. This is hard to look at when, in our own day, the Israeli government is dragging its feet on making COVID vaccine doses available to Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and Gaza. Scholars debate the force of the word "dogs" here, but the majority of commentators think Jesus' use of the word is slander, plain and simple. So, on the face of it, Jesus is saying something like, The true children of God eat the meal from the table, outsiders are entitled to the crumbs. The covenant with Abraham we hear about this morning in Genesis is limited, right? Is this what Jesus is really saying? Can you say Amen to that? I can't.

I think the is the real question: What the heck is Jesus doing in "the region of Tyre"(7.24) anyhow? It's Gentile country! It's not like Google maps misdirected him — Jesus went there on purpose to get away! What's more, he ducked into someone's house: It says, "He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there" (7.24) It's possible, but unlikely, that the house he's in keeps kosher.

Does this shed new light on what he says to the woman? His words are derisive, yes, but if Jesus was really committed to the superiority of his people, would he really have healed the woman's daughter? Think of all the times in the Gospels an opponent challenges Jesus with a question. There are dozens of debates between Jesus and the religious authorities. This is the only debate where Jesus concedes. And he concedes to a woman. A foreigner. There's something going on here! I'll tell you what I think is happening, but first, I want to tell you about some of the exciting things I see ahead for St. Christopher's.

We have an opportunity to apply for a grant from the Canada Healthy Communities Initiative that will allow us to use the outdoor part of our property in creative ways when public health regulations begin to ease, but before we are able to return to life as normal in our building. The grant would allow us to rent a large tent in the late spring or summer to be placed in the enclosed yard facing Guelph Line. This would provide us some shelter from the elements when we are again able to gather for programs outdoors. And it would allow us to serve our Tuesday meals on our property. We will keep you updated on the progress of this grant application.

One of the things that attracted me to St. Christopher's is your commitment to diversity and inclusion. If you tuned in to Penny's Questions, you know that I am committed to JEDI work (justice, equity, diversity and inclusion). I was pleased with our teamwork around celebrating Black History Month in our February worship, and particularly at last week's Jazz Vespers. In the

coming weeks, I look forward to meeting the group who started the Anti-Racism conversations at St. Christopher's. Your work will be part of the JEDI focus we bring to every aspect of our shared ministry going forward.

Here's some exciting news: I am preparing to hire a new staff member to coordinate our children, youth, and family ministry later this year. This hire will have a significant impact on our programs and our identity as a congregation. Hiring a children, youth and family ministry leader is a key ingredient of my strategy for seeing that St. Christopher's continues to be a vibrant, inclusive community. I'm pleased to tell you that St. Christopher's has received a generous donation that will fund a significant portion of this new salary through the first year of the contract. We will move ahead with this hire once the Corporation is satisfied that it fits with our emerging Multi-Year Plan, with the needs of our congregation, and with the financial plan approved by Vestry. Stay tuned in the coming months for more information!

Speaking of the Multi-Year Plan, we are moving forward, although it will still be some number of months before the committee will be able to return to the congregation with a draft of our plans. COVID really has changed so much about the way we do church. We are at a turning point, and we are going to take the time we need to get this right. The Multi-Year Planning committee has met twice since I arrived on January 15th. We are devoting renewed energy to discerning God's call for our congregation in uncertain times.

There's one piece of business arising from last year's Annual Congregational Meeting that I want to bring to your attention. Last year, members of Vestry approved a motion to "consider reinstating the Open Doors Steering Committee." The pandemic necessitated a hasty and drastic change to our operations. As a result, a "task force" was quickly formed to give advice to Christina and the Open Doors Team through those heady months last spring and summer. But it's time to implement the will of last year's Vestry on this matter in a systematic way. I struck a committee that will begin meeting next month to get the Open Doors Steering Committee up and running.

Last, I want you to know that we are changing the platform we will use for our Sunday worship. We are going to use YouTube to stream pre-recorded worship services beginning next month. We will still gather on Zoom for the "chat" portion of our services. There are a number of advantages to this move, but I will give you just two: (1) our service will not be interrupted when videos freeze up, and (2) we can promote our services beyond our current membership.

Back to Jesus healing the Syrophenician woman's daughter. What does this passage mean for St. Christopher's on Vestry Sunday? Well, Jesus is putting his finger quite firmly on the expectations religious people have for the ways God will and won't act. Even though I wish Jesus didn't refer to the woman and her people as "dogs," I think you can see he does this to show us he knows exactly where he is and what he's doing.

God's grace is not impeded by the limitations of our expectations. God's healing is real. God is all about giving a new start. COVID may have brought St. Christopher's to a critical turning point at the start of 2021, but God's grace is already moving on ahead of us. The Living God is preparing our way and equipping people in our congregation to discern that path.

Because of this I am filled with hope. We are finding ways to flourish in changing times. We will come through with our core identity as a congregation affirmed and renewed. I am hopeful because the same Spirit who rested on Jesus at his baptism, and healed the Syrophenician woman's daughter, and raised Jesus from the grave, the same Spirit is at work in us. Amen.