

Sermon
St. Mary Nanoose Bay
September 9, 2018
James 2:1-17
Mark 7:24-37

I spent an evening with an old friend of mine this week. Out of the blue she asked, “Don’t you ever have doubts?” And without waiting for an answer, she continued, “So many people seem to lose their faith when they get older.” We sat in silence for a while and then she turned to me, “Well?” and I realized she really did want an answer.

I think often that when people have a crisis or when they simply slow down and reflect on their lives, beliefs that once served them, no longer do and they fall away. It can seem like losing one’s faith; it can be scary. But often, the beliefs have been outgrown and no longer make sense. So one has to ask questions and wait for a new and deeper understanding to arrive. It’s part of the faith journey. Faith that becomes static can’t serve in the long run. Faith is relational; it lives in the heart. It doesn’t always make sense to the head. So, we have to be open to change. And questions help us move forward.

It was the poet Rilke who said, ““Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything.”

Living the questions is not for the faint of heart because living without quick answers is uncomfortable. It means having to say, "I don't know!" And living without certainty is something we don't like.

This Wednesday in Bible Study we ended up with more questions than when we started.

Listening to the letter from James we wondered about how to respond to the real needs of the people around us. Statistics show that a large percentage of children in Canada are living in poverty. There are communities in Canada where First Nations people still do not have clean drinking water. Close to us in Nanaimo we have people living without adequate housing. There is so much suffering in the world, and in our community. *What can we do as individuals and as the parish of St. Mary's?*

And we discussed the challenging reading we just heard from the gospel of Mark where Jesus basically insults a person by calling them a dog. This person is a woman, a foreigner, of a different religion. She is from a region that has been at war with Israel so could be considered "an enemy." All strikes against her. Yet she reaches out to Jesus. *How can Jesus, a person we see as ultimately loving, be so rude?*

Often, when we are uncomfortable with a situation or a person or a reading, we turn away. We look for a way to retreat to our comfort zone. Perhaps we go to wash the dishes; maybe we put a table or counter between us. I remember clearly in my younger years reaching for a cigarette and lighting up any time I felt uncomfortable

in a situation. (And I in those days, I could light up anywhere– in class, on the subway platform, in a restaurant or bar!)

Reading scripture, becoming a follower of Jesus requires us to check that impulse to turn away and to gently confront the fear within us that wants to keep challenging people and situations at arm's length.

So if our readings challenge us to go to the places and people we might not feel comfortable with, but to treat people with mercy and justice and not show preference, we have our life's work cut out for us!

Even Jesus, in today's gospel reading, is challenged. An obviously quick-witted and bright woman uses his words and turns them on their head. This is something Jesus did all the time, turning questions and ideas upside down and challenging the world-view of his followers. Here, in today's reading, he is on the receiving end for a change. When the woman asks for help, Jesus retorts, "It's not fair to throw food (his compassion) to the dogs (people other than the Jews)." She quickly responds, "Even dogs need to eat." And in saying so, calls him to task – to demonstrate God's love for all.

It's clearly love that motivates this woman. It's that great love that a mother has for her child that gives her the courage to speak to Jesus, a man, a foreigner, a person of another religion and perhaps even one of her people's enemies. Her daughter is very ill and she will do anything for her. And in her great need, she asks Jesus for help.

This, in itself, is part of the miracle that follows. That Jesus, who has escaped the crowds and wandered into foreign territory to try and find some peace and quiet, is accessible to this woman in her time of need. She has heard stories about Jesus and is desperate enough to risk ridicule and rejection.

How many of us have had our faith challenged? All of us, I'm sure. Many times. When life wasn't going according to our plans and we cried out, "God, how can this be?"

Today's readings tell us that it is in our times of need, when all everything seems to be wrong and falling apart that God arrives in amazing ways.

It's God's nature to respond. That when we ask, we shall receive. It's love that moves Creation. As with the mother, when love moves us to do things we might never have dreamed of doing, God responds. As with the deaf man's friends, in the second story from the gospel reading today, when we act on behalf of others in need, God responds.

God's love breaks through into the world in ways we can't imagine and often don't see. Our needs connect us to God. When we call out in our need, then God can respond. When we call out, out of love, than the One who created us to love, responds in love.

So whom do we love? Who do we advocate for? We've been challenged in today's readings not to have preferences, and to care for all of God's people.

These are good questions. The core of a good question comes out of love and need. Our part is to ask. God's is to respond. And we can call on God to do God's part, just as the woman challenged Jesus to do. We can ask with confidence. Because we've been told, "Ask, and you shall receive, Knock and the door shall be opened."

So take time to frame your question. As Rilke says, take time to live with it. Be patient. And keep your eyes and ears open, because chances are, the answer will arrive in a way you never could have imagined.

So come to the table of love this morning. Come with your questions, come in your need. Receive the holy food that will nourish you in ways you can't imagine.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.