

**Learning New Things**  
**The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC**  
**Rev. Jennifer Gingras**  
**September 5, 2021**

*Mark 7:24-37*

It's the first Sunday in September, which is a very exciting time in the life of our community.

And why is September so exciting? (pause) That's right, school has begun again! For some people across the country, this has meant a return to in-person learning for the first time in a long time, and our prayers are with parents, educators, staff and students as they navigate ways to keep one another safe.

Here at MCC, you may already know that we are anticipating a return to Sunday School, Junior and Senior PF, Bible study, Morning Circle, Young at Heart... so many other things that will help us learn about our faith, each other and the world around us.

Learning is an important life skill. Let's think about some of the things we learn as we grow.

When you are a baby, what are some of the things you have to learn? (*this is the interactive portion of today's sermon, folks... so let us know what you think!*) (how to sit up, how to crawl, how to walk, how to talk or sign, how to share, how to wait your turn)

OK, how about when you start kindergarten, what new things do you have to learn? (how to work at a desk, how to line up quietly, how to write letters and numbers, how to play well with others)

What about grade school? (reading, arithmetic, how to take care of pets, have chores)

What are some things you have to learn in middle school? (how to change classes, to play an instrument, study a foreign language like Spanish or French)

How about High school? (How to drive, how to balance extra-curricular activities and school work, what it's like to be in more mature relationships, how to apply for jobs)

Do adults ever have to learn things? What kinds of things? (how to pay bills, how to be a parent, how to be in a long-term relationship, how to work with lots of different kinds of people)

*And do you know any stories of Jesus learning new things?*

Sometimes I think we imagine Jesus to be perfect, like he was a baby that never cried or a toddler that never made a mess, and there's certainly a traditional understanding that would suggest that.

But if we truly believe that Jesus Christ was fully human/fully divine, I think we may be able to consider that sometimes Jesus had to learn new things ... that's the human part of being Jesus, I think.

Today's story from Mark is one of my favorites! Up until this point, Jesus has been spending his time with people who were a lot like him. He was living in a place where people were the same religion as him, where everyone shared the same rules about what to eat and how to interact with strangers.

But at the beginning of today's reading, he travels to a place that is new and different. P'Fer's might say that Jesus "expanded his box". Tyre was a metropolitan travel destination of the ancient middle east, a place where people of many backgrounds, ethnicities, religions lived together.

Here, he encountered (perhaps for the first time), people who were not like him, or any of his disciples.

And I suspect that some of the things Jesus might have been taught growing up could have made this trip a challenge. Perhaps it was difficult for him to spend time with people who were of a different religion. He might have been told to avoid them. He may have been taught not to talk to women he didn't know who weren't in his family.

Both of those things would be challenging, visiting a place where mostly Gentiles lived. But he decided to go there anyway.

Some scholars have imagined that he went to Tyre BECAUSE he was tired; and needed a break. His ministry of teaching and healing was so much work. He had gotten in regular arguments with religious leaders, he had gathered together his disciples, and his reputation had spread pretty quickly.

Sometimes the crowds would be so big that he would need to get in a boat to preach from the sea... just so he could have a little space.

And when he tried to go out into the desert for some peace and quiet, scores of people would follow him. Jesus would still help them as best he could, even feeding 5,000 of them in one story, but I imagine he grew tired.

A vacation to Tyre was just what he needed to rest and recharge.

But there he found a woman whose daughter was sick. Nobody had been able to help her. She had heard about Jesus and thought maybe he could help. She went looking for him, even though he was trying to take some time off.

Jesus and this woman (we don't know her name) would not have had any real reason to talk to each other had her daughter not been sick and had he not been able to heal people.

But, Jesus could heal people. And her daughter really needed the help.

The last time people followed Jesus when he was taking time off, he still helped them. But, they were people like him. I've heard that it can be easier to feel empathy for somebody with whom you share something in common. It's harder to empathize with people who are different, especially people that you may have been taught weren't all that great to hang around with in the first place.

And I wonder, was it easier for him to say 'no' to this woman when she first asked for his help, because they were so different? Or was his gas tank simply on empty?

That's right. Jesus said "No" at first. He said it in kind of a harsh way, too. *"Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."* It seems like he is saying that he came to help the children of Israel first, and spending his energy helping her – an outsider – would be like throwing good food to dogs.

It's like he called her a dog. That is really rude. Sometimes people are rude when they are tired and cranky. Perhaps he was just testing her or using her experience to teach others who were watching. I don't think either of those excuses makes what he said not rude, they just give him the benefit of the doubt.

I think we need to pay attention to what this mom says back to him. She was trying to figure out a way to take the unkind response and turn it around so that he would help her. She remembered what it's like to have dogs in your house.

Who here has ever had a dog in their house? How do many dogs behave while you are sitting at the dinner table? If your dog is like my dogs, they kind of hang around, waiting for something to fall or hoping they will get a treat from our plates.

It turns out that dogs have been doing that for a very long time. This story was written down 2,000 years ago and that's what dogs did then, too. She said, "*Sir, even the dogs under the table get the children's crumbs.*" Even if one group of people was supposed to get all the blessings, that shouldn't prevent someone else from using what is extra or what they threw away.

Now, Jesus could have decided right then that he didn't want to help. He was on vacation. He was mostly supposed to be helping his own people.

But... he had already helped someone who was a Gentile in another mostly Gentile town, a place called Gersara. So, it doesn't seem like he's opposed to helping people different from him. It might be that he needed to be reminded that he can do that here, too.

Even though he's tired, it doesn't mean he has to limit the mission that God gave him. Gentiles can hear his message, too, including this one who is interrupting his day off. She shows him that his message is too powerful to be limited to just the people who were like him.

And for teaching him that more people can be fed than even he first imagined, for demonstrating a great and tenacious faith, he said her daughter was healed.

What do you think he learned? This healing would not have happened had Jesus not been willing to learn something new from a stranger that he had been taught not to talk to.

I wonder if Jesus learned something powerful about his own ministry in this moment. He could do more good than he may have been able to imagine, but only if he was willing to help those whom he had been taught to mistrust.

And as it turns out, he could do a limitless amount of good in God's world... inspiring people like you and me to follow and do likewise.

Have you ever learned something from a person who surprised you? From this story, it sure looks like Jesus did.

I hope we all can be more willing to listen when someone responds to the ways we are unkind.

Or willing to change our minds when someone makes a good, love-centered point.

And confident that we can share even more than we imagined, but only if we don't let old divisions keep us apart.

I imagine some of us will have the opportunity to be like Jesus this week. We may also have the chance to be like this woman. I hope you are ready to be both, because we need both kinds of people to do God's work in this world. We always have something to learn, and something to teach.

Thanks be to God! Amen.