

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I want to tell you a story about myself that might sound a little like bragging at first. But I'm going to tell it because I think it might help us get at the deeper meaning of our readings today and also help us to appreciate our Bubbling Over event following the service. The story is about the time I was riding with my dad in the car on a highway somewhere. I think we were going to a college visit, because I'm pretty sure I was still in high school. At any rate, as we were driving, all of a sudden a car in front of us went off into the median, and then popped back up, crossing pretty close in front of us, and then go down an embankment on the other side, rolling over a couple of times before coming to a stop, right-side up. My dad quickly pulled over, and I got out and ran down to the car. There was a young woman in the driver seat looking dazed, but seemingly unhurt. I tried to open her door, but it wouldn't open. We made sure it was unlocked. It still wouldn't open. And all the time there is steam coming out from under the hood. I went around to the other side. The passenger side door was also stuck. Then I tried the back door and it opened. The woman undid her seatbelt and crawled over the seat. And I helped her up the embankment to our car. She wasn't sure what had happened, why she suddenly lost control. We didn't have cell phones in those days, so it wasn't texting. But she did say that she had just put her seatbelt on only a minute or so before, and that probably saved her from serious injury, or worse. Other people had also stopped, and someone went on to call the police. We waited until the police arrived and then we went on our way. We probably had to make a statement to the police, but I don't remember that part. And that was the end of it. I didn't think much about it after that until a day or so later when I overheard my dad talking to someone on the phone about how I had jumped out of the car and run down the embankment without regard to my own safety, and how he was really proud of me. Only then did it occur to me that I had been putting myself in danger running toward a car that had just rolled over several times and was spewing out steam. In the movies, cars like that always explode, seconds after the drivers is rescued. But maybe I hadn't watched enough of those kinds of movies by then. So good for me, I guess. But really, I wasn't being brave because I didn't really consider the danger. Maybe reckless would be a better word. My point for our purposes here is that I simply saw somebody who needed help and I ran to help her, because that's what you do when people need help. That's what I had been taught. Now, if this had happened fifteen years later, when I was the father of three young children, and I was more aware of how dangerous that kind of situation could be, I'm not sure I would have made the same choices. I like to think I would have, but I can't be certain.

What I want to focus on this morning, though, is on those times when you do what you do just because that's what is needed, because that's who you are, because you can't imagine *not* doing it – when it's more of an automatic response rather than a calculating one. And I want to make a connection to both of our second two readings, from James and from Mark.

This Gospel reading has been on my top ten list for a while now. It's a remarkable encounter that Jesus has with this woman. Remember that last week Jesus laid into the Pharisees for being so concerned with keeping themselves pure and uncontaminated by the wrong sorts of people that they had forgotten they were meant to be a priestly nation, that God had blessed them so that they could be a blessing to others – that God meant for them to share the wealth. Now, as if to prove his point, he's off to Gentile territory – just the place where those wrong sorts of people live. And has soon as he gets there, here comes this woman. Our translation says she was a "Gentile," but the in the Greek text it says she was Greek, but also a Syro-phoenician, meaning that she was a Phoenician who lived in Syria. But saying she was a Greek meant that she was a cosmopolitan Phoenician, which, as an apparently single woman, maybe a widow – the text doesn't say, might have meant that she was even more isolated from the local population than your average widow. The point is, that she was doubly marginalized in this culture. Without help, and without hope. The wrongest kind of person imaginable. And to Jesus, even more so. But she comes to him anyway, even though every cultural norm would have told her that she shouldn't.

Her people were traditional enemies of Jesus's people, *and* she was a woman, who shouldn't have been talking to a man. That's the set up, what you need to catch the dynamic here.

So she comes to him for help, and he *tells* her that she's the wrong kind of person. And he does that by calling her a dog! *Jesus* said that. "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Did that bother you at all when you heard me read it earlier? I hope it did. Because it doesn't sound like the Jesus we're used to, does it? There's one line of thinking that says Jesus was just testing her, or that he knew how this was going to play out. But that seems a little cruel to me. I think what's going on here is that Jesus is being fully incarnate, that he is fully embodying his people and his culture in order to make a point to his own people. Because this encounter doesn't go in his favor.

He is fully justified as far as his own people were concerned, in refusing this woman's desperate plea. But here she is. Desperate. Willing to do anything to save her child. She will even let this arrogant foreign man call her a dog. Whatever. Whatever it takes. Fine. I'm a dog. Fine. Feed the children first. Whatever. But dogs get fed to. Crumbs maybe, but they get fed. Throw a crumb my way. Please! Save my daughter. Because you can, and because I have nowhere else to turn.

The text doesn't say Jesus was astounded, like the crowd was later at him when he cured the deaf man. It's not much of a stretch, though, and it wouldn't be the only time he was amazed at the unlikely faith of foreigners. But however he felt, he gives in. He has fully embodied his culture and its attitudes and he has lost the argument. A man, losing to a woman. An Israelite losing to a Gentile. How humiliating! And yet he had to lose that argument. It's almost as if he went to Gentile territory for exactly that reason – to lose exactly that argument that was so readily on the lips of his people.

And how could he not? Here was someone who had turned to him in hope beyond hope, trusting that he could give her what she needed, while his own people refused to accept him for who he was. How could he not help her? It reminds me of God's final question to Jonah after the Ninevites, those hated foreigners, had repented and turned to God, whom Jonah was waiting for God to destroy. "Should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left?" Of course Jesus would help her. Because of who he was, the savior not just for one group of people, but for the whole world. Of course Jesus would help her.

James' point in our second reading fits right in here. How can you claim to trust in this Jesus and at the same time show favoritism – help some but not others? There's a lot to be said about James and its use to critique Lutheran theology, but I will leave that for the Adult Sunday School class. The bottom line is that Luther and James were ultimately making the same point. Faith leads to action. Trust in God's mercy and forgiveness for Jesus' sake draws us out of our self-centeredness and opens us up to the lives of all those other people God loves and forgives. James says "faith with out works is dead." Luther would say, "faith without works isn't faith." It's an oxymoron. There's no such thing as faith without works. And that's the point of our "Bubbling Over" event today. Faith naturally leads to love and service for other people, and so we're giving ourselves some opportunities to allow that to happen this morning. These aren't your only opportunities. Just a sampling.

But let me be clear that the message of the church is never, "Get to work! You have to do good deeds if you want to be a Christian." Our various service opportunities this morning are not there so that you can check the box for your works requirement, or to prove your faith. That's not how it works. But your if faith doesn't want to help the neighbor in need, if your faith is only interested in what it can get from God, or how it can help prop up the status quo, then we do have to wonder what that kind of faith has to do with the one who gives up everything for the sake of others, the Jesus who is willing to lose face, to loses arguments, to lose even his life for the world that God loves.

And that's why we're here every Sunday. To remind ourselves of God's selfless, sacrificial love for us in Jesus Christ that forgive our selfishness, and to give the Holy Spirit a chance to open our hearts to God and our neighbor. Because when by God's grace than kind of faith takes hold of us, how can we not express that faith in acts of love? How can we not? May we take that good news to heart, and may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.