

Sermon – Mark 7:24-37
David R. Lyle
Grace Lutheran Church
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“Whole Notes”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. It was twenty-three years ago, almost exactly. I had just finished my pastoral internship in Plover, WI – part of the greater Stevens Point metropolitan area, if you’re wondering. To kick off my last year of seminary, I flew out to Tacoma to meet up with a classmate. After spending a few days on the coast, we made the drive from Seattle to St. Paul. It took us three days to cover 1,700 miles. Which makes me wonder. Have you ever driven through Montana? Montana is so big that we stopped to sleep two times, and both times were in Montana! And yes, when you enter Montana, the sky really does get bigger. It’s not just a slogan for license plates. I’d been *in* Montana before that trip, but I’d never gone all the way *through* Montana. You could have told me how big, how capacious, it is, but I’m not sure I would’ve believed you. Like coming out of a valley into a broad horizon; like passing between skyscrapers until suddenly the lake reveals itself; like falling in love, with lover or child or friend. Sometimes the spaciousness in which we find ourselves is something for which we cannot be prepared. It demands to be taken by surprise.
2. I don’t often compare myself with Jesus, for reasons that are both obvious and many. Beginning with the hair, of course. But like me, Jesus has a bit of what we might call a Montana moment today. After trying to close himself away in a small space, and who can blame him, Jesus is found by a person. A

gentile. A woman. A mother. A mother driven by a mother's boundless love to find someone to help her demon-possessed daughter. She's heard of this Jesus, but Jesus has no time for her. It's jarring, right? Did he just say he hasn't come to feed the *dogs*? Try as we might to soften the blow, Jesus puts her off with a pejorative. There's nothing in the text to indicate that Jesus is testing her or being playful. He just doesn't seem to think there's room for her within his mission. At least not yet. So, he calls her a name. But she calls him out. Helps him, God's own Son, see that there is room in the Kingdom for her and her child, even now. She can see, sense, that when you're dealing with abundance, crumbs are enough for everyone. Even for her family. Jesus is undone, the living Word hearing in her words the truth of what he has come to do, even when he couldn't quite see it himself.

3. Matthew Skinner of Luther Seminary writes, "Her comments confess that only a table scrap of the gospel is necessary to liberate the possessed girl, and that Jesus has no compelling basis (or, perhaps, no ability) to withhold these benefits of abundance until a later time. At this point," Skinner continues, "she somehow seems to understand even more acutely than Jesus the potential and the scope of the reign of God that he proclaims." Like Jacob at the ford of Jabbok long before her time, she refuses to let go of God until God grants the blessing. For saying this, for such faith, your daughter is made well! We may seem to be in a narrow place, but it won't stay small for long. Within Jesus himself, we see the old ways of the old world be turned over and thrown out. Separation, division, hostility, oppression. Us vs. them, me before you. All gone. There is no room for such things when there is room enough for all.
4. It feels, so very often, that we are enclosed, encircled, hemmed in. Not long after driving through Montana, just days later, my classmates and I woke to the terror of this week's anniversary, towers toppling down, foreboding new wars arising. The big world felt small, and we were afraid. The forces of sin

and death, evil and empire, continue to rage and rampage today. But Jesus, with an increased awareness of his own work, sees his work through to the end. Goes to the judgment hall and the barren hill, takes the cross that humanity gives him. There, upon cold Calvary, he transgresses the final boundary, arrives at the goal, the *telos*, to which he has always been headed. In him, the finality of the line between life and death is undone. Out of death, life bursts forth, like crocuses in a suddenly-watered desert through which the people are welcome to walk on home. When life bursts forth, under the wide-open sky of the unending Kingdom, there is no room for division, no time to question whether our differences in race or gender or anything else should keep us apart. Under the wide-open sky, everything has been “Ephphatha-ed,” to steal a phrase from today’s second vignette. It’s all wide open, grounded in the unending life of the One whom the ground could not hold.

5. It is to this One, this risen Jesus, that we cling in hope, in faith. Even when it seems God is not listening, even when it seems nothing will change, even when it seems the demons won’t go away, it is to Jesus we cling, and from whom we await blessing. We live in world of violence, as we have been reminded too often in these recent days. From the streets of Little Village to the cars of the Blue Line, from the classrooms of Apalachee High School to the war-torn streets of Gaza and the fields of Ukraine, violence and death seek to cut us off and close us in. But we pray, we pray, that these moments would not be the next murders, the next school shooting, the next wars. We pray that they would be the last. Not just the next, but the last. And we know, in our world-weariness, that they likely won’t be the last. But we pray, anyway, We hope, anyway. And prayerfully, hopefully, we get to work. Not because God needs our works for salvation, but because faith, as James reminds us, without works is dead. Which is to say, only people who are still dead in their sin worry about the worth of their works. But you are alive! The old you is gone! You are free. Free! Unbound in a broad country of hope with verdant

green chasing the forever-blue horizon of hope and life. In a new world that gives hints of the still-to-be new world in which the Lamb reigns from the center, the world that is yet to come. As the free people of God, made new in Christ in whom the old is undone, we live out our vocation, our life, our hope, knowing that one day the table will be so heavy laden with the goodness of our God it will collapse under its own weight. There will be no more *under* the table, and we will all feast, crumb after crumb, every morsel containing the fullness of God's grace, just as these meager but merciful gifts convey Jesus to us today.

6. So, it's probably good that we're having a picnic today. Because what is the Kingdom of God if not a feast, a fun, a folly? And then, in this world, back to work. But the work isn't work. It's a song, music that comes forth unbidden when one finds oneself in a wide-open place, face to face with grace and unending space. And so today we sing. And we eat bratwurst, just as the good Lord intended. We install and pray for our principal and faculty, these women and men who will help our children become the faithful leaders we need. We sing, and laugh, and love. And we cling to Jesus, for without him we are lost. Hang on and expect Jesus to act. For in the end, he always has. Until the end, he always will. With single voice uplifted, we raise our songs to the risen One, through whom the Kingdom comes, a perfect world under a clear, capacious sky, more surprising than we could imagine, lit up by the life of the Lamb of God, where there is room even for you. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.