

Proper 18B '18 "Rally Day"

9 September 2018

James 2.1-10, 11-17; Mk. 7.24-37

St. Luke's Episcopal Church

North Little Rock, Arkansas

The Rev. Carey Stone

O Lord, sow deep in our hearts the seeds of faith, and so nourish them that they may spring forth with the fruits of faith, through your faithful Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

All of us can probably remember at one time or the other either as children or youth taking part in scavenger hunts. Everyone is given a list of items that have been hidden and the first one to find all the items wins.

The game started centuries ago but wasn't popularized in the United States until the early 1930's when the gossip columnist Elsa Maxwell hosted some exclusive parties for New York City's social elites. The game was satirized in the 1936 film *My Man Godfrey*, where one of the items socialite players were trying to collect was a homeless person or "forgotten man" as they referred to him. The town of Provo, Utah currently holds the Guinness World Record for having the most live participants in a scavenger hunt with 2,079 people. Variations of the game continue to be popular with church youth groups and with adults who use them at parties as icebreakers. Well, probably more than you ever wanted to know about the scavenger hunt but it underscores my use of it as a metaphor.

Jesus was on a 'scavenger hunt' of sorts, a scavenger hunt for faith. He was on the lookout for it everywhere he went and the gospels reveal that this treasure of faith can be found in some very unlikely people and places. We see through Jesus' life and teaching that faith was no longer to be a matter of birth but a matter of the heart.

In people like the Syrophenecian woman who is from the area that today is called Lebanon, faith was not a matter of the place you were born, or the tribe you were born into, but a matter of the heart. The cosmic shift that Jesus was bringing meant that faith would no longer come through high birth but through lowly trust in a Power greater than ourselves. From now on, the heart would be the place where true faith dwells, not an inherited trait but a gift of grace that brought about a change of heart.

Faith has been known to appear in some strange and unexpected places: deserts, prisons, and in Jonah's case, in the belly of a whale. In the gospel stories and parables we hear tell that faith has been found in ethnic groups like the Samaritans, Lebanese, Palestinians, and Italians like the Roman centurion to whom Jesus once said, "*I have not found faith like yours in all of Israel.*" 'Really, great faith in a gentile?' In the religion of Jesus' day this was supposed to be wrong on many levels, but in God's kingdom it was to become the norm.

Throughout the gospels lively faith was a moving target, showing up all over the map and finding Jesus always gravitating towards it, being moved by it wherever and in whomever he encounters it.

One of the more dramatic of these faith encounters is found in today's gospel reading that centers on the story of the Syrophenecian woman. In the first century she had three strikes against her and was the ultimate underdog. First, she was a woman, second she was a Gentile from Lebanon, and third her daughter was possessed by a demon. She then has the audacity to approach a Jewish rabbi, Jesus and throw herself at his feet begging him to heal her daughter. Jesus at first responds to her rather coldly as any Jewish man of the first century would: *"Let the children be fed first, [children, meaning the Jews] for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."* Then with the comeback of comebacks and this not just from a quick wit but also from a faith-filled heart she says: *"Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."* She was reminding Jesus that even the dogs were a part of the family and if that's the level she had to stoop to then she was willing to do it. Her faith was such that just a crumb from God's table would be enough to heal her daughter! Jesus was rocked by her solid faith and tells her, *"The demon has left your daughter."*

This signaled a powerful shift in Jesus' ministry – from this point on it would become more and more apparent that Jesus had come to save the whole world not just a small sliver of it. In the life and teaching of Jesus the words that were announced long ago by the prophets were being fulfilled, where the blind were seeing, the deaf were hearing, the lame were dancing, and where the deserts were blooming!

Perhaps on this Rally Day that comes around at St. Luke's each year at this same time is our opportunity to go on a 'scavenger hunt of faith'. Like Jesus we have new opportunities to find faith in some of the most interesting people and places, in prayer groups, in Sunday school, in music like our FOS concert series, or in moving choral anthems by our choir, in stunning handbell pieces, in the laughter and in the cries of children, in men's and women's study groups and service groups, in ministries to youth, and homeless families, in hungry and homeless veterans, and perhaps on a good day even in a sermon.

Today is a Great Day to start over – and to 'get on board' with God's people and find and experience faith once again. In the old spiritual from the civil war *"The Gospel Train"* we are invited once again to see our lives as a journey of faith and to 'get on board' with God's plan for us:

I hear the train a comin'
I hear her close at hand
I hear those car wheels rumblin'
And rollin' through the land.
Get on board, little children
Get on board, little children
Get on board, little children
There's room for many-a-more.

The fare is cheap
And all can go.
The rich and poor are there
No second class upon this train
No difference in the fare.

Get on board, little children
Get on board...