



# Trinity United Methodist Church Newsletter



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## What Would Jesus Do?

### *The Surprising and Troubling Story of the Syrophenician Woman*

...<sup>26</sup> Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. <sup>27</sup> He said to her, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Mark 7:24-30

The Gospels repeatedly tell two types of stories about Jesus. In the first he is approached by a Gentile and, usually to the dismay of his disciples and the crowd, helps the Gentile and praises their faith. In the second type of story Jesus verbally spars with someone, usually a Scribe or Pharisee, and clearly wins the argument. In the midst of all of these stories stands the exchange with the Syrophenician Woman from the Gospel of Mark (mark 7:24-30). In this story a Gentile woman comes to Jesus and asks that he heal her daughter by exorcising a demon. Jesus responds in a very harsh way:

<sup>27</sup> He said to her, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

Most scholars interpret this statement to mean that Jesus came to bring the Gospel to the People of Israel, the “children,” and that it shouldn’t be wasted on the “dogs”, the Gentiles. Rather than slink away in shame, however, the woman turns Jesus’ argument back around on him:

<sup>28</sup> But she answered him, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”

Her response points out that the dogs are a part of the “family” and traditionally are entitled to the “food” the children drop on the floor. Jesus acknowledges that she has succeeded in making her point:

<sup>29</sup> Then he said to her, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.” <sup>30</sup> So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Nothing further is said about the exchange.

Many Christians find this exchange very troubling. To begin with, we are not used to seeing Jesus refusing to help someone. When someone comes to Jesus humbly asking for help, as this woman did, we expect Jesus to give that help. We certainly do not expect Jesus to offer a rebuke or insult to someone who asks for help and it is interesting to note that when Matthew used this story the rebuke was excluded. Matthew 15:21-28. Finally, we do not expect Jesus to be bested in his argument which is clearly what happens. To appreciate this story we need to delve a little deeper into its background.

There is no question from a biblical perspective that Jesus is portrayed as the Jewish Messiah in the Gospels. The Messiah, the anointed of God, was to lead a new dynasty in the mold of King David. Despite the fact that Jesus' Messiahship is much different than expected, it is clear that he viewed his ministry as one starting with his people the Jews. Thus, while Jesus did have dealings with Gentiles, he spent most of his time with the People of Israel.

In this story, Jesus has been engaged in ministry for some weeks or months and is starting to be besieged wherever he goes by people wanting healing. See e.g. Mark 6:53. According to the text he is in Tyre, a region predominately Gentile, and is hiding in a house not wishing his presence known. Mark 7:24. Tyre was a seacoast city, dependent in part on receiving the produce of the surrounding region. The peasants in the Jewish area would have sold their farm produce and animals to the people of Tyre in a market controlled by the Gentiles. In a real sense, the "food for the children" was being fed to the Gentiles of Tyre. It is here that he is approached by the Syrophenician woman.

In this context Jesus' remark is somewhat more understandable even if it is still troubling. He is seeking a respite from his own people and here he is accosted by a Gentile seeking healing. Just as the people of the City want the produce of the Jewish peasants, so this Gentile wants the gift of healing that has been shared primarily with the Jewish Peasants. Jesus initially refuses using the insult wherein the Jews are his children and the Gentiles are dogs by comparison.

The woman, rather than being insulted, uses Jesus' verbal ploy in the same manner Jesus himself used it when dealing with the Pharisees in the preceding scripture. See Mark 7:1-23. She turns his words against him. Expanding some on her speech she says "Yes, we Gentiles are like dogs. But, aren't dogs also part of the family in a way? The dogs are not fed first but do they not receive the scraps from the children's table?" One can almost see the smile come to Jesus' face realizing that his insult has been countered in the same manner he so often used to turn away insults and rebukes. He acquiesces and grants the woman's request. In Matthew's telling of the story Jesus commends the woman for her faith. Matthew 15:28.

For us, this story invites us to consider our own preconceived notions about the lives and worth of others. Some Christians seem to think that the Gospel is intended only for a few and that they can identify those who are worthy to receive it (usually people who look and think just like them). Others would rather not deal at all with those who are different. The story of the Syrophenician woman reminds us the Gospel is intended for the world, and it is not our job or right to filter or withhold the Gospel.

## **One Hundred and Fifty Years Living As The Body of Christ**

As many of you already know, we will be celebrating the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of Trinity UMC on June 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup>. People are already beginning to work on the celebration but we need your help. Please talk to Cheryl Wilson, Nancy Conway or Jeanne Rybolt about ways that you would like to help and to

see if they have tasks that you hadn't considered. *In particular, we need someone who would be willing to help produce and edit a media presentation of peoples' recollections and experiences at Trinity in recent years and in years past.* If you would like to be a part of that effort, please contact Rev. Meaker.

## The Bible as the Tennessee State Book

I have been the pastor of Trinity UMC for five years. By now you should know that I do everything possible to insure that my ministry is centered in scripture. All of my sermons are closely tied to scripture and, I believe, those who have participated in bible studies with me know how much I love the bible. Even when we struggle together on the meaning of scripture it is with the understanding that our faith beliefs are derived, in large part, from scripture. An article of faith of the United Methodist Church is that scripture contains all that is necessary for salvation and that we cannot impose a condition for salvation that is not based in scripture.

Despite my love of the Bible, I am disturbed that there is a bill in the State Legislature to make the Bible the "State Book." There are number of official State objects. For instance, the "State Flower" is the Iris. The "State Bird" is the Mockingbird. There are two current and one prior species of "State Fish." The smallmouth bass is the official "State Game Fish", (having replaced the largemouth bass as the official "State Sport Fish" in 2005) and the channel catfish is the official "State Commercial Fish." Speaking before the Tennessee Legislature on Tuesday, April 7<sup>th</sup>, Rev. Michael Williams of West End United Methodist Church had this to say:

*"I love catfish, but listen, it doesn't come close to the Holy Scripture..."*

Rev. Williams went on to explain that placing the Bible next to the other State objects does not so much honor scripture as demean scripture.

There are a number of problems with this legislation. First, it is hard to see how adopting the scriptures of one religion as the "Official State Book" is not an establishment of religion in violation of the Tennessee and United States Constitutions. Second, which version of the Christian bible is to be adopted (assuming that the Legislature does not intend to simply include the Jewish Canon)? The Catholic Bible contains books not included in the Protestant Bible. Many Tennessee Christians would not accept any translation other than the King James Version. The Bible is translated into hundreds of languages with ambiguities of translation resulting. The English translations are themselves translations of texts based upon three other languages (Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic). Third, while the bible is central to our faith, it is not what we worship. The bible can, if we let it, become an idol that we worship in place of God. Making the bible the official "State Book" seems to raise it to the status of something to be worshipped. Finally, any Christian legislator voting for this legislation should reflect on Matthew 6:1 *Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.* Is the legislator voting for this bill parading his or her faith in public as the "politic" thing to do? Only God knows.

The State is facing real issues and problems, not the least of which is the lack of healthcare for thousands. Perhaps the legislature can find something more pressing upon which to focus its time and energy.

## **Easter Season Sermon Series**

### **What's the Least I Can Believe and Still be Christian?**

Several years ago Dr. Martin Thielen, a United Methodist Pastor here in the Tennessee Conference, wrote a book titled, "What is the Least I Can Believe and Still be a Christian?" The title is not really descriptive of the thrust of the book but comes from a question Dr. Thielen was asked by a parishioner contemplating a profession of faith. Dr. Thielen uses the question as a jumping off point to discuss things that are not central to Christian belief and things that he believes are central to Christian belief.

Beginning April 12, the Sunday after Easter, I will begin a ten part sermon series loosely based on Dr. Thielen's book. The first five sermons will focus on propositions that you do not have to believe to be a Christian. The second five will focus on propositions that I believe are central to Christian Faith. The titles for these sermons are listed below:

- *You do not have to Believe that God Brings Catastrophes into Our Lives. **Preached April 12th***
- *You do not have to Believe that Women Cannot be Preachers or Leaders of the Church.*
- *You do not have to Believe that Christians Never Doubt.*
- *You do not have to Believe that "Bad" People Will be 'Left Behind' by God.*
- *You do not have to Believe that Everything in the Bible Should be Taken Literally.*
  
- *To be Christian, You Must Believe in Christ.*
- *To be Christian, You Must Believe in the Church, the Body of Christ.*
- *To Be Christian, You Must Believe in the Holy Spirit.*
- *To be Christian, You Must Believe in God's Love for the World.*
- *To be Christian, You Must Believe in the Resurrection.*

One reason I offer sermon series is to provide an opportunity for you to be able to invite people to our Church. It is sometimes easier to invite people to come and visit the Church when you can tell them what the sermon will be about. A sermon series offers people an opportunity to get to know us over a series of weeks and experience what it is like to participate in our ministries. I encourage you to take this opportunity to invite others to "Come and See" what Trinity United Methodist Church is like.

## **72+U The Mission and Ministry of the Tennessee Conference and Trinity UMC**

*After this the Lord appointed [seventy-two] others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. <sup>2</sup> He said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Luke 10:1-2*

The mission of the Memphis and Tennessee Conferences of the United Methodist Church is to Discover, Equip, Connect and Send lay and clergy leaders who shape congregations that offer Jesus Christ to a hurting world, one neighborhood at a time. The values underlying this mission are:

Unrelenting love for all people

Integrity  
Excellence  
Faithfulness and Fruitfulness  
Innovation

Luke 10:1-2 describes the beginning of the first missionary effort of the Disciples of Jesus Christ. Some translations state that Jesus sent forth 70 disciples, others say that he sent forth 72. The Tennessee and Memphis Conferences, under the leadership of Bishop William McAlilly have adopted that scripture as a map for our own mission in our communities. The Bishop has invited us to view our communities as our mission fields, seeking to bring the Gospel to everyone in our communities.

In the coming months I will bring you more information about this mission initiative and how we might be a part of it.

## **The Poverty and Justice Bible**

*The Poverty & Justice Bible* is a bible that highlights each passage of scripture that deals with the issues of poverty and justice. There are more than 2000 references in scripture to poverty and justice, as opposed to four or five on such controversial subjects as homosexual acts or marriage. Yet many Christians seem to think that helping the poor is a pointless and even harmful act. As an on-going part of this newsletter, I will be providing citations to passages from the Old and New Testaments each week that deal with what scripture tells us about poverty and justice. If you are interested in learning more about *The Poverty & Justice Bible* you can check on Amazon.com or go to [www.Justicebible.org](http://www.Justicebible.org).

*<sup>26</sup>A hunter traps birds  
and puts them in a cage,  
but some of you trap humans  
and make them your slaves.  
<sup>27</sup>You are evil, and you lie and cheat  
to make yourselves rich.  
You are powerful  
<sup>28</sup>and prosperous,  
but you refuse to help the poor  
get the justice they deserve. Jeremiah 5:26-28 CEV*

What is the purpose of life? Some seem to live by the concept that whoever has the most when they die ‘wins.’ Here God, speaking through Jeremiah, describes people who treat their fellow human beings as if they were animals to hunt and then do with as they please. People who are willing to do anything it takes to acquire riches and power, including cheating the poor and lying to gain their way. Yet, God states that God places a premium on those who look beyond themselves to insure that the poor among us, the powerless, receive justice.

*<sup>16</sup> When we drink from the cup that we ask God to bless, isn't that sharing in the blood of Christ? When we eat the bread that we break, isn't that sharing in the body of Christ? <sup>17</sup> By sharing in the same loaf of bread, we become one body, even though there are many of us. 1 Corinthians 10:16-17 CEV*

Christianity denies the concept that we must focus always on what is best for ourselves. That was the problem Paul was facing in Corinth. Many people viewed themselves as superior to others. Paul's theology of the Lord's Supper proclaims our unity in Christ. If we focus our goals only on what benefits us, we separate ourselves not only from others but from Christ.

## Prayer Ministry

The following persons have agreed to be part of the prayer ministry at Trinity UMC:

Elva Beard	Sarah Jordan	Kenneth Stevens	Judy Richardson
Larry Eastwood	Mac McAfee	Patricia Stevens	Charles Wilson
Leslie Eastwood	Rachel Newman	Sam Richardson	

The members of the prayer ministry of Trinity United Methodist church covenant with one another to pray daily for:

- Those concerns on the prayer list of the Church and for healing of body and spirit for all persons listed;
- For each ministry of the church that each ministry would work to bring the Gospel to those within our community and most especially to bring the Gospel to those who have not yet accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior;
- For all the members of the Trinity UMC community that they be led and enabled to live as the Body of Christ;
- For our local community and all its needs, especially for those who are struggling with the burden of poverty;
- For our nation and our world that God help lead the people of the world to live in peace with God's Kingdom.

If you would like to be a part of this ministry (or if you have already spoken to me about it and were inadvertently left off the list) please let me know and I will see that you are added.

## Up-Coming Sermons

April 19: **“What Do I Have to Believe?” You do not have to Believe that Women Cannot be Preachers or Leaders of the Church.** One of the greatest on-going sins of the Church is its rejection of women as pastors and leaders. Even in the United Methodist Church where women have been ordained for over fifty years there are many who oppose women pastors. This Sunday we will apply the Wesleyan Quadrilateral to analyze the scriptures on women in ministry. My texts are 1 Timothy 2:1-15 and Rom 16:1-16.

April 26<sup>th</sup>: **“What Do I Have to Believe?” You do not have to Believe that Christians Never Doubt** Somewhere along the line some Christians decided that doubting their faith or doubting God was a sin. In reality, the presence of doubt is often an aid to faith since it keeps us searching. My texts are Proverbs 3:1-8 and Mark 9:14-24.

## **Worship Leader's Schedule**

### **April 19**

Stacy Bell, **Liturgist**

Tommy & Jo Cotton, **Greeters**

Donnie & Renita Hartsock, **Ushers**

### **April 26**

Rachel Newman, **Liturgist**

Jason & Lindsey, **Greeters**

Maurice & Joyce Edwards, **Ushers**

## **Announcements**

**“Companions in Christ”** Sunday school class is beginning a new study. Adam Hamilton is a pastor and Christian author who has written a number of books, some of which we have studied previously. Our current study is an effort to make sense of God's will. Some of the questions we are discussing are, “Why do the innocent suffer,” “Why do my prayers go unanswered,” “Why can't I see God's will for my life?” and “Why God's love prevails.” We meet at 9:45 AM in the adult Sunday school room. Everyone is welcome to join us as we enjoy fellowship and study together.

### **April Birthdays**

**Betty Whitefield, Mary Coleman, Jo Oliphant, Jason Aldred, Houston Hartsock**

**Happy Birthday to each of you!**