

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Fourth Presbyterian Church
23rd Sunday after Pentecost
September 9, 2018

What Is God Up To?

Psalm 146; Mark 7:24-37

What is God up to?

Do you ever wondered that?

Do you ever look out at the world,
or at the circumstances of your own life,
and wonder— **What is God up to?**

We certainly are living in very interesting times in this second decade of the 21st century.

Nothing dull about our world these days.

It seems one would almost have to be an Atheist not to wonder every now and then,

What in the world is God up to?

Or perhaps one could be a Deist,

believing that God exists
but is far removed from us, “up in heaven”
and uninvolved in anything that is going on “down here on earth,”
so to speak.

But for Christians,

who believe in a God who is active in history,
and acts in and on creation, and is at work in and among human beings,
it would take either a great lack of curiosity
or a great heap of despair and lack of faith
NOT to be wondering,
What is God up to?

For most of my years as a Presbyterian pastor

there has been a movement in the church known as the
“Missional Church” movement
for which this question — **What is God up to?** —
is central.

In fact, my doctoral work some 20 years ago

was very much immersed in this Missional Church movement,
in this idea that wherever the church exists, even if it's in a so-called Christian context,
the church is called to be engaged in God's Mission,
the *Missio Dei*.

We just spent all summer in our Adult Church School Summer Series
talking about what that might look like here at Fourth.

But let's take a moment and be honest:

How many of us wake up in the morning and ask the question,

What is God up to in the world and in my life today?

And if we don't ask that question,

doesn't that make us functional Atheists?

Or functional Deists?

Certainly, if we truly hold Christian faith in our hearts
we would wake up believing God is up to something in the world
and we are called to be involved in it.

We are called to be a missional church,
participating in the *Mission Dei*, the mission of God.

But how do we know what God is up to in the world and in our lives?

If we want to be Christian
we look to the stories and the teachings of Jesus.

There are other options than being Christian.
We might simply view the world as Americans,
which these days so often means tribal Americans
since so many of those who would define America would do so by
dividing us into tribes, or camps, or parties.

In fact, if your first question in the morning is...
What is the Republican party up to?
Or What is the Democratic party up to?
Or What is the Stock Market up to? Or down to?
Or What is my income up to?
Rather than,
What is God up to?
...I hope this sermon will give you pause to question
the orientation of your heart.

Speaking of the stories of Jesus,
the one today in the Gospel of Mark is pretty astounding
when it comes to our question
What is God up to?

Astounding, because
even Jesus is apparently surprised by the answer.

Now, you may not care for this kind of talk about Jesus being surprised.
You may rather prefer to think that nothing ever surprised Jesus because
Jesus was God.

But remember, our faith goes both ways on this:
Jesus was also fully human.

And (at the risk of oversimplifying)
we have 3 Gospels that emphasize Jesus' humanity
— the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke —
and 1 Gospel that emphasizes Jesus' divinity
— the Gospel of John.

One of our former Pellett-Wearn lecturers, Professor Brent Driggers, walked us through the Gospel of Mark a few years ago making the point that this gospel is not so much about what Jesus is doing as what God is doing that Jesus participates in.

And in this story,
God is apparently up to something bigger and broader and more expansive
what Jesus has been focused on,
so much so that even Jesus is given serious pause
to reflect on the focus of his ministry.

In our story,
Jesus sets out and goes away to the region of Tyre;
that is, he leaves Jewish Galilee and ventures into Gentile territory.
He crosses a border from his home country
into a neighboring country, where he is a foreigner.

He enters a house, and Mark tells us,
he did not want anyone to know he was there.
Jesus is trying to lie low.
Maybe he's worn out and needs a break.
But it seems he's not going to get one.

Mark says Jesus *could not escape notice,*
...a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him,
and she came and bowed down at his feet.
Now the woman, says Mark, *was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin...*
Literally, the text says she was *Greek,*
which is a cultural designation.
And, again literally, *of Syrophenician ethnicity, or race.*
The Greek word here referring to things like
skin tone, accent, and who her parents were.

So this woman crosses at least three boundaries in her courageous approach to Jesus:
religious, cultural, and racial.
The other thing about Tyre
is that it was probably the "most important seaport in Phoenicia.
It was "the leading city in an area of mixed population
where Jews lived as a threatened and oppressed minority."¹
In the early first century,
there were outbreaks of violence against Jews in Tyre.
Jews were regularly mistreated,
and certainly were economically ostracized.

In terms of distance,
traveling from Genessaret where Jesus had been up into the region of Tyre
would be like walking from here to Asheville, or maybe Hendersonville—
except, it would be as if, instead of Asheville, it was Kabul, Afghanistan.
Tyre was not a welcoming place for Jews.

So all this means that the woman was crossing not only religious, cultural, and racial, but also political boundaries, in her approach to Jesus.
Despite all this,
She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.

Given all this about Tyre,
we might be a bit more understanding of Jesus response
when he says 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.'*

It would not have been uncommon
for Jews to call Syrophoenician Gentiles "dogs" or worse,
or for Syrophoenician Gentiles to call Jews the same, or worse.
Nevertheless,
we might hope for some more compassionate response from Jesus.

Many commentators will defend Jesus' response,
saying that he is just being clear about his mission:
God has not sent him to the Gentiles
but to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.
This may be true,
but even so,
it is hard to put Jesus' response in any kind of a good light,
in terms of human kindness,
other than to give him a pass and understand
that even Jesus could get tired and cranky.

But the woman is not dissuaded by Jesus' irritation.
Rather, she shows courage and tenacity and rhetorical savvy.
In a sort of verbal judo,
she uses the weight of Jesus' argument
to throw him off balance,
She answers him,
"Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

Sorry if you were hoping I was going to say something to get Jesus off the hook here.
The story is what it is.

Jesus is verbally bested by a brave and persistent woman and mother.
To Jesus's credit, he knows it immediately.

That is, Jesus is self-aware enough, and situationally-aware enough,
to come to this realization
a lot faster than most Christians who read this story
and want to guard their image Jesus's perfection.

He says to her,
*"For saying that, you may go--the demon has left your daughter."
So she went home,
found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.*

The church has long debated what was going on here with Jesus:

Was he caught up in the limited views of his religious community,
and this woman helped him see the bigger picture?

Or was he just being consistent in clearly defining his ministry to Israel first.
Might not Jesus, burdened by the needs of his own people,
have shunned a Gentile woman in the belief that
if he were to heal her he would be besieged by a superstitious Gentile throng?²

Even given this more positive attempt to rehabilitate Jesus' offensive question,
this scene brings us back to our question:

What is God up to here?

Mustn't Jesus have been wondering that?

Perhaps God's work — the *Missio Dei* — is even more inclusive
than what Jesus had set out to do?

Perhaps nothing is going to limit God's power to bring healing
and to bring the kingdom where God wants it to go?

Not racial differences.

Not cultural divides.

Not political tribalism.

Not religious bigotry.

Jesus may have been focused on Israel First.

But God had bigger plans.

Whatever limits Jesus had placed around his ministry
were not limits by which God would abide.

What do we learn here about **what God is up to in the world?**

Perhaps, if it is possible for even Jesus to be surprised by God's mission,
we might do well to expect a few surprises,
even some uncomfortable surprises.

If God will even push God's own Son out of his comfort zone,
who are we to resist being nudged out of ours?

Psalm 146 might also push us in challenging directions.

What is God up to?

This is the God *who executes justice for the oppressed;*
who gives food to the hungry.

...sets the prisoners free;

opens the eyes of the blind.

...lifts up those who are bowed down;

...watches over the strangers;

...upholds the orphan and the widow,

but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

So then we might ask, **What is God up to here?**
Here at Fourth?

I went and took a look at Fourth's Vision Statement with this question in mind.
I realize that our Vision Statement says plenty about what we are up to,
but never explicitly says **what God is up to.**

However, our Vision strongly implies that we do what we do,
and seek to be what we seek to be,
all because of what we believe God is up to in the world.

In our Vision, we say,
"Fourth Presbyterian Church is a missional church
that lives the gospel of reconciliation,
cares for all of God's creation,
and serves Christ in all people,
especially those who suffer, struggle, and doubt,
proclaiming with hope the kingdom of God."

This gospel of reconciliation
is what was going on between Jesus and the Syrophenician woman.
This is the story of
God's ever expanding concern
for ALL creation and ALL people,
especially those who suffer struggle and doubt.

The trajectory of the gospel is in ever widening circles.
God's mission encompasses all the earth.

Like Jesus,
we may have to more narrowly define our part in that broader purpose.
We may need to focus on a few things
since we can't do everything.

But also like Jesus,
we may find God challenging the narrow views
of our inherited culture.

And whether Jesus "really meant it" when he called the woman a "dog"
it is clear from the healing of her daughter
what God really meant:
What God really meant
was that the hope of the gospel
...was for this woman across the border
...and her daughter, too.

What is God up to?
What is God up to?
I hope we never stop asking that question.

¹ Brendan Byrne, *A Costly Freedom: A Theological Reading of Mark's Gospel* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2008) 125

² Dale Allison offers this interpretation of the parallel passage in Matthew 15:21-28. See *Matthew 8-18* in the *International Critical Commentary* (London: T&T Clark, 1991) 541-560