

Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, 16th Sunday after Pentecost, September 9, 2018.

This is the time of year when young people and their parents and their teachers are leaving the comfort zone of summer vacation, for a new school year with its unknowns. Appropriately our lessons this morning are about comfort zones.

Let's look first at Jesus (**Mark 7:24-37**). He is on the move, visiting regions to the north and west of the Sea of Galilee. Tyre and Sidon were not Jewish enclaves. Rather they were home to Gentiles or non-Jews. From the lesson, we learn that Jesus did not want to advertise his presence in these neighboring territories. He seems conflicted, not comfortable. He has been baptized. He has called disciples to follow him. But he has questions about what he and his disciples should be doing. Perhaps by traveling outside his geographic comfort zone, he is testing himself. Not the deep end of the pool, but more than a toe in the shallow end. He is stretching.

On this "stretching journey," he meets a Gentile woman who has a sick daughter. We don't know if the mother has heard about Jesus. Probably so. After all, she visits the home where Jesus is staying. While we don't know what she feels about interacting with Jews, we do know that she has a child who needs help and the mom is desperate to find that help. And, if what she has heard about this carpenter from Nazareth is true, then why not see if this person can help her daughter? Staying in her comfort zone is less important than getting help.

The conversation gets off to a rough start. The mother begs Jesus to cast out the demon that is terrorizing her daughter. The response of Jesus does not seem helpful. "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Is Jesus referring to the distinction between Jew and Gentile? Or perhaps between those who can be helped and those beyond help? We don't know. And neither does the mother know. But she is not deterred. Indeed she responds with a very persuasive statement. "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

When Jesus verbally brushes her off, she verbally pushes back. It's possible that both Jesus and mother are now operating out of their respective comfort zones. But the push-back works. Jesus is duly impressed, and in fact heals the daughter

on the spot. “For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter.” The mother returns to her home and finds the daughter free of the demon. Jesus, with some brave prodding from the mom, has enabled a wonderful outcome.

This positive result seems to energize Jesus. If he was uncomfortable before, he is more comfortable now. A deaf man is brought to him for healing. He touches the man and commands, “Be opened.” “And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.”

Another good outcome, but still some reservation on the part of Jesus. “Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it.” Jesus, it seems, is no longer in charge of his comfort zone. Sound familiar? The people “are astounded beyond measure.” The proverbial cat – in this case the power of Jesus – is out of the bag.

In a sense, Jesus is growing into his identity as the Messiah. Remember these words from the Prophet Isaiah, a prophet all Jews studied. But only a few who studied Isaiah wondered if they might be the One of whom Isaiah spoke. “Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you.”

Jesus probably had been wondering for many years about his mission in life. His birth was different. His childhood was different. His adulthood was different. At the Jordan River, John baptized Jesus and spoke of this difference. Jesus began to wonder, and now the wondering was gaining momentum. He knew he had a healing gift. He could see the results. He could also see the hope and trust of people in need. It didn’t matter if the person was a Jew or Gentile. The power of Jesus to heal knew no bounds, geographic or otherwise. The words of Isaiah (**Isaiah 35:4-7a**) were ringing true: “For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water.”

“Comfort zone?” What comfort zone? From **Psalms 146**: “The Lord shall reign for ever, your God, O Zion, throughout all generations. Hallelujah!” “Am I the One?” has become “I think I am.”

The events of the next several months would confirm this possibility. Jesus begins to think beyond a “comfort zone.” Traditional comfort is no longer the issue. Doing the will of His Father is the issue. Jesus needs now to execute the mission, the Messiah assignment. “Who gives justice to those who are oppressed, and food to those who hunger?” Jesus now says, “I do.” Psalm 146 makes perfect sense now.

This self-awareness would be tested all the way to the Cross. He would be crucified precisely because he would not waver. He knew what he had to do, and he did it. This remarkable obedience unto death was in fact his new “comfort zone.” Not one to escape, but one to embrace. “Into thy hands, Father, I commit my spirit.”

You and I spend many years struggling with our Faith. Our journey is often uncomfortable because there seem to be so many questions. But what we discover as the journey progresses is that the closer we get to the Risen Lord, through study and prayer and service, the more comfortable the journey becomes. Whatever one calls this experience - a second wind, a helping hand, an epiphany – it’s a difference maker.

At any one moment, some are looking for that second wind, reaching for that helping hand, and hoping for a breakthrough, while others are already there, living confidently through thick and thin in the knowledge that Jesus saves. We here are a mixed bag, and the mix can change from one week to the next, from one life event to the next, from one disillusionment to the next, from one confirmation to the next. But you know what? It is this mix, with all its fluctuations, that is a “comfort zone” of its own.

Today’s passage from the Letter of James (**James 2:1-17**) is pretty disturbing. Even to read it is to convict oneself. “What is the good of proclaiming one thing and doing another?” The author makes us think. The author reminds us that we have work to do to live up to our faith. The author challenges us to be who we claim to be or want to be. But this challenge is itself a part of the mix that is the Christian Faith. There is no comfort in being reminded of our shortcomings, but there is great comfort in confronting these shortcomings through the One the author describes as “the glorious Lord Jesus Christ.”

Where else can we say to Jesus, as the mother does in today's gospel, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Jesus invites this honesty, this energy. He welcomes the dialogue, even when he is questioned in the dialogue. This exchange capacity is a huge element of our Faith. That is what prayer is for. "Get it out of your system," Jesus says. "I can handle it. I will help. Work with me on this challenge. I'll go to the Cross for you. That's how much I care."

The Prayer Book contains something called the "Comfortable Words." These are passages of assurance offered following confession and absolution in the more traditional Holy Communion service. Many of you will recognize these sentences.

Come unto me, all ye that travail and are heaven laden, and I will refresh you.

God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, to the end that all that believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

This is a true saying, and worthy of all men to be received, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

If any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the perfect offering for our sins, and not for ours only, but for the sins of the whole world.

This is the real Comfort Zone. Jesus embraced it. And you and I can embrace it too. How special is that!

The start of school. New teachers. New friends. New challenges. New zones. Bring them on. We're ready. Thank you, Jesus.

Amen.