

Rally Sunday Sermon – Sept. 10, 2006
Mark 7 “Holding onto Jesus”

G&P.....

A recent *USA Today* article portrayed vividly the courage of true friendship: Anne Hjelle and Debbie Nichols were friends who were mountain biking on a wilderness trail near Mission Viejo, California, when a 110-pound mountain lion sprang from the brush, pounced on Anne's back, and dragged her off by the head.

Nichols screamed for help and grabbed Hjelle's legs, trying to free her and engaging in a desperate tug of war with the cat while other cyclists threw rocks at the cat until it fled.

Jacke Van Woerkom said she was riding behind Hjelle and Nichols and later spoke to Nichols at the hospital.

"She had some blood on her face. She definitely showed signs of a major struggle," Van Woerkom said. "She was shaking, trembling. She said, 'I was not going to let go. I was not going to let go.'"

Nichols described the tenacity of the cat, saying, "This guy [the cat] would not let go. He had a hold of her face..."

But the tenacity of the cat, was overcome by the faithfulness of a friend. She continued, "I just told her, 'I'm never letting go.'"

USA Today (1-09-04); submitted by Larry Trotter, Wake Forest, North Carolina

Such stories give us pause and wonder. What kind of tenacity does it require to hold onto a friend in need? What kind of hope does it require to hold on in faith that God will come through? Would we be up to the challenge? Sometimes there is not much thinking involved, sometimes we just react in action for that other person.

We encounter several stories this morning about such things as hope and determination. Both are surprising stories. The first is the story of the Greek woman in the gentile territory who has heard that this Jewish messiah has come to her hometown. She has a concern, a grave concern. A daughter who is very sick, filled with a demon is the best way for her to describe the malady of this child. What we see in this story is that this mother loves her daughter more than anything. Not even the demon can

keep this mother from loving her daughter. She is relentless in her search for a cure.

Even when she encounters Jesus in the most unusual conversation that we have in the gospels. For here Jesus tries to ignore her. He even calls her a dog which is how Jews referred to non-jews in a prejudicial way. We never see Jesus in this light. Yet we wonder if he is testing her resolve. Testing her heart. For she comes make a comeback comment that surprises even Jesus.

"First let the children eat all they want," he told her, "for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs."

"Yes, Lord," she replied, "but even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

Jesus marveled at her faith and the word that she spoke. He could not resist her request any longer. In that moment Jesus cast the demon out of her daughter. The daughter was not even there. Jesus gave the word and gave the credit to the determination of the mother.

“Your word has cast out this demon.”

In that moment the daughter was healed. The mother rejoiced when she came home saw her daughter well again.

Jesus continued on his journey this time he went to the region of the Decapolis, the Ten cities of Greek and roman culture. The people came out because of the words that they were hearing about Jesus. Friends brought with them a friend who could not hear or speak. They asked Jesus simply to lay his hands upon him. That is all they asked.

Jesus took this man aside and place his fingers in the mans ears, and spat and touched that mans tongue. He looked up to the heavens and prayed. He said,

Ephphatha which means “Be Opened.”

The man could hear and speak. Jesus commanded him to go home and say nothing to the crowd. But the more the man told the people that he could now hear and speak. He spoke volumes about Jesus, not even Jesus could shut him up.

Alonzo Mourning terrorized and dominated many opponents in the National Basketball Association during most of the 1990s. Then Mourning was diagnosed with a kidney ailment that threatened his career, as well as his life. After being away from the game for several years of treatment, recovery, and strengthening, Mourning is back with his team, but with a new perspective:

"I remember five, six years ago, I felt like I was Superman," the 35-year-old Mourning said. "Nobody could stop me. First team All-NBA, Defensive Player of the Year—you name it. I was getting all the accolades because of my so-called invincibility. But I was humbled. I realize that I've been given another opportunity to live my life. I'm going to relish this opportunity and treasure this opportunity like it's my last."

Mark Montieth, "Jersey Numbers Costly," Indianapolis Star (3-6-05); submitted by Greg Huffer, Lebanon, Indiana

His reaction to healing and being on the other side of health is incredible. He did not miss the point and that is exactly what the healed man and the mother did. They rejoiced and celebrated the new life that they had just received. Another chance, this is grace of God.

They could see the hand of Jesus in their life. They could now hear the words of grace in their hearts. They could now share the living Word of the one who had brought them back from despair and into new life now. To celebrate life now. To share this grace of Jesus now. To hear the words of Jesus now in every word that we live.

They were given that chance to live their life without the roadblocks of disease and demons! Alonso Mourning was able to live again with a kidney transplant. That disease had been in their face for years. It dogged them where-ever they went. Now it was gone.

There are many roadblocks that are put in our way. Some we choose. Some hit us like a mountain lion out of the blue. Some we embrace only to discover that they have a choke hold on us. Sometimes anger and hate can take over everything that we do. Sometimes it baggage from the roads that we have traveled, sometimes it is the stuff we have experience in the battles of life. When we are so focused on that stuff of death, we lose the chance to really live.

In graduate school, I took a course in Chinese philosophy. The Buddhist monk who taught the course said to me, "As a Christian, you teach your children to pray all wrong. You teach them to pray, 'If I should die before I wake.' It would be better if you taught them to pray 'If I should wake before I die.' "

The monk went on to point out that most of the people he knew were half awake when they ought to be asleep. But even worse, when they were asleep, they were half awake. No one seemed to be totally alive. Nobody seemed to be turned on to what was going on around them.

What are your days filled with? Are your days filled with the anger of yesterday that pours into today? Are you battling the choices that you have made that have soured over time? Jesus gives us grace to open our ears to grace. He gives love to open up our tongues to words of encouragement. He gives us the word that challenges us on what we truly believe about God. He gives us opportunity through confession to lay before his cross all of the anger and hurt and anguish that dog us. All of the mistakes that we carry around like wounds as if it is some kind of badge.

Jesus wants you with all of your baggage. Jesus wants you with all of the wounds that won't heal. Jesus wants you and he wants to put to death all of the things that get in between us and Him. This is the point of the cross. This is where he takes all of our stuff unto himself and destroys it. So that we might healed to live, even for a moment, in the grace of Jesus.

Tony Campolo tells this story:

I was in a church in Oregon not too long ago, and I prayed for a man who had cancer. In the middle of the week, I got a telephone call from his wife. She said, "You prayed for my husband. He had cancer." I said, "Had?" *Whoa, I thought, it's happened.*

She said, "He died." I felt terrible.

She continued, "Don't feel bad. When he came into that church that Sunday he was filled with anger. He knew he was going to be dead in a short period of time, and he hated God. He was 58 years old, and he wanted to see his children and grandchildren grow up. He was angry that this all-powerful God didn't take away his sickness and heal him. He would lie in bed and curse God. The more his anger grew towards God, the more miserable he was to everybody around him. It was an awful thing to be in his presence. After you prayed for him, a peace had come over him and a joy had come into him. Tony, the last three days have been the best days of our lives. We've sung. We've laughed. We've read Scripture. We prayed. Oh, they've been wonderful days. And I called to thank you for laying your hands on him and praying for healing.

And then she said something incredibly profound. She said, "He wasn't cured, but he was healed."

Tony Campolo, "Year of Jubilee," Preaching Today #212

Healed in the grace of God that it changes whole lives, what a gift. What are you carrying? Let the Word of God pour over you like the waters of baptism, cleansing your very soul. Let the words of Jesus touch you here. Ephphatha – Be Opened! To Life Now!

AMEN