

***Gone to the Dogs...***  
**Kirkland Congregational Church, UCC**  
**Revs. Tod & Ana Gobledale**  
**6 September 2009**  
**James 2:1-10 (11-13), 14-17; Mark 7:24-30**

Come with me to South Africa in 1986...

I cannot believe my ears! The words strike me dumb and numb, like a blow I received as a child falling from a tree. The shock knocks the wind out of me. Time stands still. In what feels like an eternity, but in reality is only a moment, I take in my surroundings.

The office walls, adorned with medical certificates, are a pleasant pistachio-green. A family photo sits on the doctor's desk. Through the window the blossoms of a jacaranda tree cast a purple shade that lends a coolness to the hot day. But now my blood runs cold. I sit facing the District Surgeon wondering "What am I doing here? Why did I even think I could do anything?" I want to rage, "God, why did you bring me here to Africa? Why am I in this District Surgeon's office? God, you knew this would happen. What am I supposed to do? I need a miracle!" ..."

Let me take you back to where this all started...just a week ago. Mr. Mthimkulu rolls into our garden on his clunky, old bike. "Umfundisi, Umfundisi, pastor, pastor," he calls, "Vusi Sibiyi needs to go to hospital." Home alone with little Thandiwe, she comes, too. I plunk her into her carseat, and I jump into the driver's seat. Mr. Mthimkulu continues on his bicycle to work in the fields. Thandiwe and I bump along the dirt road to Vusi's home. Everybody knows where the infamous Vusi lives, but I have never actually met him.

I park the car and walk down a steep path to his kraal--a collection of round, mud huts; the thatched roofs sag with age and neglect. A strong smell permeates the air. Has something died? My nose crinkles with the stench. I enter the dark of a hut. Hesitantly, I draw near a huddled form lying under some thin blankets, illuminated by one small window.

The face, with skin pulled oddly across it by a massive burn scar, repels me. The frightened eyes of the young man before me reflect the fear I feel. I quickly recover. I steel myself and greet him. "Sawubona, umfowethu," --hello, brother. "Ngingumfundisi Gobledale"-- I am pastor Gobledale. And so I meet Vusi Sibiyi, face-to-face.

Vusi, epileptic, years ago, when left alone in a hut, suffered a seizure triggered by the flickering light of the fire. He rolled into the flames, burning his leg so badly it was amputated. Now, it has happened, again, and he has badly burned his other leg. The hospital fee of six rands--about 2 dollars a day--keeps him home. Vusi hopes his burns will heal without treatment. More than a week passes. I now know the source of the stench, rot sets into Vusi's leg. I reckon, he will be lucky to live, to say nothing of keeping his leg. We must get Vusi to hospital.

I am unable to lift Vusi whose upper body is a heavy mass of muscle. He crawls using his strong arms and the stump of his amputated leg and maneuvers up the steep path to the car. Thandiwe and I roll down the windows to minimize the smell.

At hospital the receptionist announces, "If Vusi had a permanent disability stamp in his pass-book, he would receive free treatment. Since he has no stamp, he must pay full fees."

After a conversation with the head doctor, fees are waived. Then the hospital doctor places a mission in my lap. He directs me, "Go to the District Surgeon's Office and apply for Vusi's permanent disability stamp." Like Jonah dreading the mission God places in his lap: "Go to Nineveh and prophesy!" I hear the doctor's words with dread.

Whenever Tod and I must deal with the apartheid authorities, representing our Black parishioners and community, always a head-ache ensues, always a battle, often a defeat. Like Jonah, I want to hop on a boat and flee in the opposite direction. But I embark on my mission.

Now, I sit in the District Surgeon's office in Melmoth, a little whites-only town in South Africa. The District Surgeon studies the papers I have brought from hospital verifying Vusi has lost one leg and may lose the other. Without looking up, the District Surgeon says, "I will grant Vusi a temporary disability permit. We will review his case in five years."

I cannot believe my ears—"temporary disability." The words strike me dumb and numb. I want to rage, "God, why did you bring me here to Africa? Why am I in this District Surgeon's office? God, you knew this would happen. What am I supposed to do about it? I need a miracle."

"An illness threatens my little daughter. I hear, we hear, that you cure diseases. You drive out demons. Please, heal my child!" so pleads the Syro-phoenician woman in the passage from Mark that Jerry read this morning.

Illness, disease, injuries,.... Think back on illnesses or injuries you have known. Remember... your mum's face, pinched with worry, as she hovered over you when you were down with something. Remember... looking at the face of your own child, or spouse, or loved-one when they were bed-ridden. Remember... the feeling of helplessness. Remember the hope that comes with the promise of medical assistance. The doctor arrives. She makes a diagnosis. A surgical procedure brings healing. Or a prescribed medicine works a cure.

Now, how would you feel if it went like this...? The doctor looks at you and says, "I know what ails your loved one. I have the power to cure. But, only a select few receive my treatment. And this one, your beloved, is not one of the elect."

Jesus refuses to offer treatment by saying to the mother begging him to heal her daughter, "Let the children be fed first. For it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." ...Throw it to the dogs...Jesus calls the imploring mother, and her ill daughter, dogs.

The author of Mark's gospel, places Jesus in an extremely un-favourable light, at least from our vantage point two thousand years later. But at the time of the story's telling, people thought this way. Gods were gods of select people. The God of Jesus and the Jews was not the god of the Syro-phoenicians. And at this point in the story, Jesus understands his mission to be among his people, the Israelites, and the Israelites alone.

Suddenly this Syro-phoenician woman explodes Jesus' understanding. Pleading for her critically ill child, her desperate words, "Even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs," rock Jesus. This alien woman, this non-Jew, sees the big picture, and shows it to Jesus: God excludes which one of us? God, creator of all, does not recognize which one of God's own children? Which people does God leave out when distributing blessings, mercy, forgiveness, and healing power? Who is alien to God's love?

Jesus answers the mother, "For saying that, you may go." His response initially sounds like a dismissal. But Jesus continues, "The demon, the disease, has left your daughter." God's power returns this Syro-phoenician child to wholeness, to health.

I will be so bold as to proclaim, Jesus learns a lesson. The mission placed in his lap expands. Through this woman and her faith, God speaks, "Reach out, Jesus, not to just a chosen few, but to all. My glory and grace shine on all." The Syro-phoenician woman shows Jesus that his incarnation of the divine, his revelation of God's love, must stretch beyond his narrow notion of God's elect, must include all... Now, that is a miracle.

Back in the District Surgeon's office, I cannot believe my ears—"temporary disability." The

words strike me dumb and numb. What will this one-legged, Zulu-speaking, poor, Black man do when his ‘temporary disability’ classification runs out? Who will help him return to hospital for the doctor's certification? Who will bring him to this whites-only town, to the District Surgeon's office, to re-apply for his disability pension. Who will help him down the road in five years time?

Carpe Diem! Sieze the day! Here. Now. It is me. Yet I am thinking, “Take this cup from me.” When I recover my voice I blurt out, and I cannot keep the sarcasm from dripping off each word, “Doctor, do you really think Vusi’s leg will grow back in five years?” As I recall those words I cannot help but laugh at the silliness of it all. What was that District Surgeon, a physician, thinking?

The District surgeon looks surprised by my disrespectful outburst. He dismisses me from his office. I retreat to the reception room. The African sun shines brilliantly, but a cloud hangs over me. I tremble with the outrage I feel. The District Surgeon calls the receptionist into his office. She returns carrying an envelope. With a a mean, hard look, she hands the envelope to me. I take it and leave. Outside, I sit quietly, prayerfully, allowing my nerves to settle.

I take a deep breath. Time to face the music... it is not easy. Who wants to drink from the cup of confrontation? Who wants to stand up to the Ceasars who oppress God’s people? Who wants to stand against the current and proclaim, that all people deserve the fruits from this garden of God's creation. That the knowledge and skills we have are to be shared with all. That they are not reserved for a select few. Who wants to say that those with more money, those with more power are not the only ones to be considered. That the health and healing powers in our hands, placed there by God ,are for all people. Who wants to be like the Syro-phoenician mother asking her challenging question, ‘Who is to be denied?’

There will be consequences and costs. Health care does not come free. Are we willing to share? And I will pay consequences for my outburst and challenge to the District Surgeon. He will talk with others. We will be seen differently by the Apartheid authorities who do not want to share the wealth of South Africa beyond the white community.

Holding my breath, dreading rejection, I open the envelope. I read the short message printed on the District Surgeon's letter-head: “Vusi Sibiyi is granted **permanent** disability.” With an exhalation of joy, tears spring to my eyes.“ Why did God bring me here to Africa and to the District Surgeon's office?...” Vusi Sibiyi will receive a pension and health care for the rest of his life.

***Pause...***

God has called each of you to this place in this time. What mission is before you? Before us?  
The gifts of God for the people of God. Let us pray.

### **Let us pray.**

God, your love for everyone, citizen and alien, is greater than anything we can imagine. We are grateful for Jesus's humanity, his need to grow in his understanding, too. Thank you for doctors and medicines that carry out your healing mercies. Embolden us to stand up and speak out for those who would be left behind, left out of care. On this Labor Day weekend, renew our commitment to accept the work you place before us. Help us not be afraid to share the bounties of this earth with all your children. Through Christ the healer of us all. Amen.