

SERMON “Be Opened”
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SCRIPTURE Mark 7: 24-37

The Syrophenician Woman’s Faith

24 From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. * He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, ²⁵but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. ²⁶Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷He 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.’ ²⁸But she answered him, ‘Sir, * even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.’ ²⁹Then he said to her, ‘For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.’ ³⁰So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Jesus Cures a Deaf Man

31 Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. ³²They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. ³³He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. ³⁴Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, ‘Ephphatha’, that is, ‘Be opened.’ ³⁵And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. ³⁶Then Jesus * ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. ³⁷They were astounded beyond measure, saying, ‘He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.’

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Perhaps Jesus needed a Labor Day weekend, or at least a Labor Day. A day off.

Just prior to this passage from Mark’s gospel, Jesus had had an encounter, maybe we can call it a verbal altercation, with the Pharisees. In response to the Pharisees asking why his disciples eat with unwashed hands, Jesus explained that it’s not what a person eats – what goes into his or her mouth, that makes him or her unclean, but what comes out of their mouths. And he had called the religious leaders hypocrites – for honoring God’s word with their words but not with their actions. He used the practice of expecting the people to make their donations to the temple, even if it is money that they would have used to care for their mother or father. This

flies in the face of God's command to honor one's father and mother. It must have been a tough day for Jesus.

Now, I image that the exchange with the Pharisees and explaining his words to his disciples was exhausting. Especially after he had recently fed 5000 people, walked on water, and had traveled and healed many in Gennesaret. So Jesus had tried to slip away. He had gone to a house in the region of Tyre, a private house in a far off place, where he hoped no one would find him.

Jesus needed a break. He was, after all, human. In her book, liturgy of the ordinary, sacred practices in everyday life, Tish Harrison Warren writes about Jesus' humanity. She points out that we hear about Jesus' birth, a bit about his childhood, and the next thing you know, he is at the river Jordan with ordinary people, waiting to be baptized. She also points out that Jesus had done nothing extraordinary prior to coming up out of the Jordan, dripping wet, when "suddenly the Spirit of God shows up and the deep mystery of God reverberates through the air; this is the Son of God, the Son the Father loves, in whom he is well pleased."¹ God called Jesus beloved before Jesus did anything spectacular. How about that?

Warren reminds her readers that before his baptism, before going into the wilderness, before beginning his ministry, Jesus had "spent decades in obscurity and ordinariness. As if the incarnation itself is not mindbending enough, the incarnate God spent his days quietly; a man who went to work, got sleepy, and lived a pedestrian life among average people."² Jesus is God incarnate; fully God and fully human.

So it's not surprising that Jesus needed down time, away time, alone time. And perhaps it shouldn't be surprising that the Jesus that we hear in this exchange with the Syrophenician woman does not sound like the Jesus we love and worship. Perhaps we catch a glimpse of the human Jesus.

This woman had found Jesus in that place he had tried to escape to. She interrupted his plans. Mark tells us that she found him immediately. She went up to him, knelt down, and spoke to him. A woman. A stranger. A Gentile. She had no business approaching a Jewish man, a Jewish teacher and leader - because she was a woman and a Gentile. It went against societal norms. It would have been taboo. And she approached Jesus as he was trying to get away from the crowds.

So when she asked Jesus to heal her daughter who was possessed by demons, Jesus was not particularly understanding. In fact, he was insulting. He told her that his mission was first to the children of Israel and it "is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." How humiliating!

¹ Warren, Tish Harrison. liturgy of the ordinary, sacred practice in everyday life. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. 2016) p. 17. ² Ibid. p. 16.

How unlike Jesus. Was he tired? Was he being legalistic like the Pharisees? Was Jesus so focused on his work, his ministry, his mission to the people of Israel, that he had tunnel vision and could not see this interruption as a chance to extend God's love to others? Or was he testing the woman? Or should the translation be puppies rather than dogs – said with humor? While theologians debate what and why Jesus responded in a less than compassionate way, the encounter did not end.

You see, the Syrophenician woman was a mother with daughter who was possessed by demons. She was not to be detoured from her mission. She had a sick daughter. She wanted her daughter to be made well. That was her mission, to have this man heal her daughter. She was going to do everything she could, including allow herself to be humiliated, to have this man, this Rabbi, this Jesus, heal her daughter. She had faith in Jesus.

What amazing faith! Unlike the Pharisees, who would routinely challenge Jesus and his authority; unlike the people of Jesus' home town, Nazareth, who had rejected him; this stranger believed with all her heart that Jesus could heal her daughter. She replied to Jesus' rebuke by telling him that "even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." She did not seek to elevate herself or respond to his insult by insisting she was not a dog or puppy. She asked for the crumbs that fell to the floor. She asked for a crumb. All her daughter needed was a crumb ... from Jesus ... and she would be healed. How great was this woman's faith!

Jesus saw her faith. He was moved by her faith. So he granted her request. He told her "For saying that, you may go-the demon has left your daughter." Without leaving that house, Jesus healed that woman's daughter.

In that exchange, seeing her great faith and the depth of her love for her daughter, Jesus then saw that woman as a person and heard her plea as a mother. And whatever it was that had temporarily allowed those unkind words to come out of his mouth left him. Jesus, the healer, responded to the woman, the Gentile, the one who had interrupted his plans. Jesus healed her daughter, a child of God, even though she was not a child of the Jewish tradition.

And then, as if to make clear the importance of hearing, speaking, and inclusion, Mark shared the story of Jesus' going on to the region of the Decapolis. Again, he was traveling toward people of different ethnicities, nationalities, and faiths. There he healed a man who was deaf and unable to speak. Jesus put his fingers in the man's ears. He spat and touched this man's tongue. Jesus intimately placed his fingers into this man's body – his ears and his mouth; a man who would have been considered unclean, a sinner, a man who would not have been fully accepted into social gatherings. And Jesus said, "Be opened." Then the man's ears and mouth were opened. He could hear and he could speak.

Jesus healed him. He took away those physical conditions which prevented that man from hearing and speaking. And he broke down the barriers which would have caused him to be shunned by others and excluded by society. We don't know if that man was a Jew or Gentile.

But we know Jesus healed him. Jesus included him in his mission and ministry and enabled him to fully enter society. Jesus was demonstrating his mission and ministry to heal the physical conditions and restore the body to health but also to remove the obstacles which kept that man from living his life fully in society. We see the Jesus we know and love, the Jesus who embraces strangers and calls them neighbors.

On this Labor Day weekend, let us reflect on this story of healing – on Jesus, that Syrophenician mother, and the man who was healed. Let us ask ourselves if there are times when we are tired or annoyed by being interrupted as we are working or trying to rest? Do we hear the cries of mothers – teen or unwed mothers; of single mothers or fathers who are working but may have to decide between paying for heat or buying groceries; or the stories of refugee or immigrant mothers and fathers that are looking for safety for their children and want to be accepted? Do we see them as God’s children? Do we speak about them as God’s children? Do we open our hearts with compassion? Do we open our mouths to remind others that these people are God’s children when we hear them speak about these strangers in an unkind manner? And do we live our mission and ministry on a day to day basis with open eyes, open ears, and hearts; bringing compassion, healing and welcome to others?

On this Labor Day weekend, may we celebrate our ministries, the work we do as individuals and as a church as we attempt to live the Gospel. And may we take time to rest so that we may carry on that work with compassion and love.