

Mark 7:24-37

²⁴From 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.

³¹Then 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.”

In Bible Study Thursday morning, we noted that things move fast in the Gospel of Mark. Immediately is one of his favorite transition words. But we also learned that Jesus needs time to rest and recover from his bursts of activity.

So recently, Jesus has very been busy. First, he healed a gentile possessed by a demon; then he called and sent out his disciples, fed a large gathering and had 12 baskets of bread and fish left over, and calmed the sea. And if that wasn’t enough, he debated with Scribes and Pharisees over what makes someone acceptable to God.

And comes to mind a line from a Jimmy Buffett song:

And now I must confess
I could use some rest
I can’t run at this pace very long
(Trying to Reason with Hurricane Season)

So he goes far away to rest and recuperate and finds himself in Gentile territory. There he hopes no one will recognize him and get some needed r and r.

But this is not to be. A desperate gentile Syrophenician woman comes and begs Jesus to save her daughter from demon possession. She faces a triple threat, race, and culture, and gender work against her.

So Jesus drops everything and heals her, right? Wrong! No, he doesn’t. He sounds like a southern moderate in the early sixties speaking of integration and civil rights. These things take time. You know you must be patient. It’s not the right time to heal your daughter. I have so much to do with the children of Israel I don’t have time for you now, maybe later.

And besides, he adds, it's not right to throw the children's food to the dogs. This is my wife saying don't feed Gus from the table, which I continue to do. On the contrary, it is harsh and insulting. Although some dogs were domesticated, many were wild roving pack animals that ate almost anything, including corpses. Indeed a common Jewish insult for gentiles was to call them dogs.

So he refuses her and insults her while leaving the door open for healing later.

So what's going on here. This behavior is so unChrist-like. His behavior is not the answer to "What Would Jesus Do?" This passage is so disturbing that people, through time, have tried to twist it to mean something different. A few novel interpretations have been developed and used so Jesus doesn't appear to be so insensitive.

He was just kidding, or he said it with a wink and a nod and a smile on his face, and besides, he was talking about cute little puppies. This really doesn't stand up to the way things went. What he said sounded harsh and insulting, and it was.

Neither does the other interpretation work that, like God tested Job, Jesus was testing her faith. This, too, falls flat as she has already shown great faith by begging for the healing from the one she trusts can grant it. She has plenty of faith, and it is in plain sight.

More likely is that even though he has healed a gentile before, Jesus believes the main thrust of his mission must be to the Jewish people. And he is just too tired to think through what is going on. He is exhausted and snaps at her. He is tired. We have been there and done that. We are not at our best when we are tired.

So the woman wakes him up, saying she can't wait, echoing Dr. King's classic, "Why We Can't Wait." This "Wait" has almost always meant "Never".

The time for waiting is past the time is ripe. Please heal my child! Now! And then she turns his own words back on him.

Even the dogs get the scraps from the master's table. And if we harken back to the feeding of the five thousand, a dozen baskets. There is an abundance of leftovers. There is enough food, there is enough good news: There is enough shelter for us. There is enough work for us. There are plenty of resources for us. There is no bread shortage and no miracle shortage. If we share God's bounty, we will not run out. Like the line in the old youth group song, "Love is something if you give it away, you end up having more." God's economy is based on generosity and abundance, not scarcity and selfishness, and serves as the model for our outlook on life.

By her begging and her retort, she reminds Jesus that his mission from God is to all people, including the Gentiles whose region he is now hiding out in.

Nevertheless, she persisted. Jesus can overcome the Scribes and Pharisees but not this fierce mother. She will not be put off.

And thank God for her as she helped open the door for us. She opened his eyes wide enough to see that there are no limits to God's love.

To put it bluntly. Jesus gets schooled by this woman whose moxie and chutzpah make him recognize his error, and from this point on, the world becomes his mission field.

God comes to Jesus in the person of this woman to remind him of his mission, and he gets it. Tired, exhausted, worn down, he still gets it.

Although this interpretation is most faithful to the text, people through the ages didn't like it because Jesus comes off as less than perfect. He is rude and mean. However, Jesus does come off as perfectly human. He shows that, like us, he is not always at the top of his game, especially when he is interrupted when he is exhausted and only wants and needs time for himself. And I don't think his divinity is threatened because he does heal the little girl.

This may be one of the greatest miracles of life depicted here. Oh, not the healing and not even the boundary-crossing though those are something special. The greatest miracle to me is simple admission I was wrong. Wait, that is not so simple. Sometimes one of the hardest things to admit is that I was wrong and change my ways of doing things.

And like Jesus sometimes, to learn this, we may have to find ourselves in unfamiliar situations that challenge the way things have always been. It may take a stranger or someone we least expected to open our eyes to a new reality. God too may come to us in the stranger to teach us a new thing.

But it seems to me that if Jesus can continue to learn and grow, so can I, and I don't have to be always right. I know that it feels like an act of weakness to admit being wrong, but it is really a sign of the strength of our character.

More times than I would like to admit, I have to say I messed up. My bad. I made a mistake, I am sorry, and I will try not to do it again. I have had to say it several times this past week. And as scary as it can sometimes be, it feels good to not have to be all defensive and seek to avoid responsibility.

Jesus changes his outlook. Thanks to this woman.

Thanks to this woman, from this point on, Jesus is all in for **all** folks. He adjusts the range and scope of his mission. He grows beyond what he thought into what God had in mind for him. Crossing boundaries of race, gender, culture and class are no longer the exception to the rule; they are the rule. This is his path and the way he calls us to follow.

Can you think of times in life when, like Jesus, you were so sure of your path, direction, and purpose and then had an encounter with someone that changed all of that? They helped you grow and see things in a new way.

So how does this changed Jesus put this into practice?

The child is healed, and Jesus leaves there, goes deeper into the gentile territory, and heals a person with a hearing and speech impediment. This man was brought by friends for healing because he really couldn't speak for himself, unlike the woman. Sometimes, people who are hurting in body, mind, and spirit or are oppressed by systems of injustice need us to speak up for them. They need advocates. Sometimes we need to be advocates for the hurting, and sometimes we need advocates when we are in need.

They bring him to Jesus, and he heals him. There is a deep intimacy to the healing as Jesus sticks his fingers in his ears, spits, and touches the man's tongue.

He has come a long way since his encounter with the woman and her child.

Now healing for is for gentiles. And he breaks down any barriers that might have existed in his follower's minds in the physical way he accomplishes this healing. He doesn't just pronounce healing. He touches a gentile who his own people considered unclean. But Jesus knows better. All God's people are ritually clean because they are God's creation.

He demonstrates by his words and his actions that all people are acceptable to God. Just as God proclaimed Jesus beloved at baptism, Jesus now proclaims this man and, by extension, all of us beloved. We hunger for the divine touch that says you are my beloved. And it is offered to us by Jesus.

The man is so excited. Jesus tells him to be quiet and not to tell anyone. Like that's going to happen. He has just had clear speech given to him how can he be silent? He must speak of God's abundant love, and so must we.

It reminds me of the song by Pete Seeger and covered by so many artists. *How Can I Keep From Singing?*

“When friends by shame are undefiled, How can I keep from singing?”

But this is not just spiritual. There is enough food, enough resources, enough for all. We must stop operating in an economy of scarcity and change our hearts to one of abundance.

And then Jesus is off and suddenly feeds four thousand people whom scholars say are gentiles as well, and there is plenty left over there as well. No scraps and no waiting, Jesus pitches a real feast for these folks and will do the same for us. Jesus' love, like loaves and fishes, cannot be exhausted when they are shared.