

Be Opened

Mark 7: 24-37

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We're back in the sanctuary today, and back in the gospel according to Mark. We re-join the Mark story immediately following a dramatic contest between Jesus and the Jewish elders known as the Pharisees. The Pharisees have approached this jostling Jesus and asked him why his disciples eat without washing their hands, for according to tradition it is spiritually unclean. Jesus replied harshly, Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, when he said, "people glorify me with their lips but not their hearts," you abandon the commandment of God and instead focus on human tradition. Then Jesus turns to the crowd and says, it's not what goes into a person that defiles him, it is what comes out. It is not what he eats, or what he breathes, or what is done to him that defines a person, it is what pours forth from him, motives and actions.

What follows are the two stories we read today.

Mark 7: 24-37 (NRSV)

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."

It almost feels like God in Jesus Christ "had a moment." He went away from Galilee to Tyre, Gentile non-Jew country, and didn't want anyone to know he was there. But when he could not escape notice, when a woman needing healing for her daughter came and threw herself at his feet, Jesus has some rather caustic words for her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Was Jesus tired and ornery? He did get accosted here while trying to get away unnoticed. Was he consciously demeaning to this woman outsider? He did insinuate she's like a dog. Did he just forget himself as the Son of God, the Messiah, and suddenly act like a jerk? Some read the passage as an episode in which Jesus got corrected when he went astray from his principles of love and inclusion.

But remember, in the story just before our text today, Jesus has just admonished the Pharisees for their preoccupation with human tradition. Religious tradition doesn't matter, only faithfulness and loving-kindness and giving do. And then we hear Jesus utter what sounds like an old proverb, like the ones the Pharisees were worried about, let the children be fed first. Many interpret this proverb to mean let the Jews be fed first, let them be healed first, because it wouldn't be fair to take the food or healing intended for the Jews and throw it to the dogs, the gentiles.

Maybe Jesus had a moment of deviation, but more likely Jesus and Mark the storyteller are doing what they always do, provoking. For just after Jesus denounces Pharisees for preoccupation with tradition, Jesus

throws down a proverb from tradition, and in an instant we the hearers of Mark's gospel discover how utterly useless that religious proverb is for ministry in Tyre. This inwardly focused proverb, classifying people, prioritizing those inside the Jewish faith, has little value when doing ministry in Gentile country. What to do here, tradition says prioritize the Jews, those who know or even appreciate what a messiah is, but a Gentile woman is begging for her daughter's healing. We've just heard it's not what goes into a person that defiles them, it's what comes out...

And if that's difficult for the eminently religious to wrestle with, consider how thick the plot is here for "insiders." For the woman who comes before Jesus is as much a religious outsider as there could be. She's a woman, check, a non-Jew, check, a Syrophenician, check. This woman was from Syrophenicia, home of the seductive and destructive Queen Jezebel, who in the old testament turned an Israelite king away from God in favor of a Phoenician god. Religious insiders don't forget such things. If that weren't enough to make the Pharisees squirm, this is a woman, non-Jew, Syrophenician, who also approaches Jesus, a man, inappropriately. Check. This is a Pharisees' nightmare, an inappropriate woman seductress who probably doesn't wash her hands before meals. It's like Courtney Love walking into a Benedictine monastery, somebody is going to have a heart attack.

And there are some other prejudices getting played upon here, it would seem. Many scholars have deduced that this story also plays on prevalent religious and social tension between the poor Jewish farmers and the rich Gentile urbanites in the region of Tyre, who during tough climates would get the Jews' food. It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs. This story plays on the prejudices and predispositions of the religious insiders, and it must have made their blood boil over.

So there are a number of ways the Pharisees and hearers of Mark's gospel are getting played, but the real operative one here, it seems, is whether you need to be a Jew to get Jesus. Mark's very first verse is "the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, Son of God." That first sentence sums it all up, this is the Christ, the messiah, the anointed one, the Son of God. The Jews knew the tradition of the anointed one, the messiah, they had for the last 800 years or so been waiting for the return of the promised one who would restore the greatness of Israel, who would be chosen by God to lead the people back to greatness and unity. Jesus was this messiah, this anointed one, this fulfillment of Jewish prophecy, Mark is clear on that. So how would an outsider even get that? Doesn't it take a Jew to understand Jesus for who he is and follow him?

And yet this outsider, this total glom-on, she didn't go through the proper membership classes and she didn't take the proper vows and obey the proper commandments, she didn't get baptized, we might say, dares to approach Jesus and dares to respond to his teaching.

This is a text about believing in the presence and power of God. This bold, faithful woman knew that her place with God, beloved, was not the same as her place in the human hierarchy. So she stepped outside those imaginary human boundaries, and offered up her most powerful divine possession – hope – and when the words from Jesus' mouth were not those of the loving, inclusive God she heard about and yearned to believe in, she challenged it. She answered the startling words of Jesus with her hope, with her faith in the Son of God who was walking the earth and offering healing and wholeness. She responded that the bread of God finds its way to everyone, even the outsiders. Even the dogs get the children's crumbs. And it would appear, according to Jesus, she was right. This is a gospel about the expansive, liberating power of God's love, meaning that no matter who you are, if you approach this god boldly in hope, you've tapped something deep and true.

Amanda and I used to worship at a church called Central in Atlanta. One first Sunday of the month that church celebrated the Lord's Supper, as we will do together today. Our pastor issued his standard invitation to the table, which goes something like this: "If you are hungry for a world of justice, if you are hungry for a world of peace, if you are hungry for a world where death and suffering have no power, then come, come to this table and eat." Most of us heard this invitation as words we've heard before, nice ideas. But worshipping

that Sunday was a homeless woman who had come for an escape from the cold and an encounter with God in worship. When she heard those words, “If you are hungry for justice, peace, life, come” she jumped up and ran to the communion table and fell to her knees with open arms.¹ While the moment was strange and didn’t fit with the way we mainline Presbyterians usually do communion, while the woman was an outsider to civilized society and the church, there was more gospel in her approach to the table than perhaps the 150+ years of that sanctuary had ever seen.

In the healing story that follows the Syrophenician woman, Jesus touches a man who is deaf and mute, and said to him, “be opened.” In light of the extraordinary encounter Jesus had with the strange bold woman who came before, we can hear in these words, “be opened,” a call to have your ears opened and your tongue freed to proclaim THIS boundary-breaking good news about God’s presence and power that have come for EVERYONE.

¹ Rev. Dr. Tom Long tells this story, too, as I’m sure everyone who was there does! http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/long_5217.htm