

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

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, ²⁵ but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. ²⁶ Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷ He 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." ²⁸ But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." ²⁹ Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." ³⁰ So 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. ³² They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. ³³ He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. ³⁴ Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." ³⁵ And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. ³⁶ Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. ³⁷ They 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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*A man fell into a pit and couldn't get himself out:
A subjective person came along and said, "I feel for you down there."
An objective person came along and said, "Well it's logical that someone would fall down there."
A Christian scientist came along and said, "You only think you're in that pit."
A pharisee said, "Only bad people fall into pits."
A mathematician calculated how he fell into the pit.
A news reporter wanted an exclusive story on his pit.
A Calvinist said, "If you had been saved, you never would have fallen into that pit."
An Armenian said, "You were saved, and you still fell in that pit."
A charismatic said, "Just confess that you're not in that pit."
A realist came along and said, "Now that's a pit!"
A geologist told him to appreciate the rock strata in his pit.
An IRS agent asked if he was paying taxes on his pit.
The county inspector asked if he had a permit to dig the pit.
An evasive person came along and avoided the subject all together.
A self-pitying person said, "You haven't seen anything until you've seen my pit."
An optimist said, "Things could be worse."*

A pessimist, said, "Things will get worse."

Jesus seeing the man reached down, took him by the hand and lifted him out of the pit.

Yup, that's Jesus—always helping people—just like we find him doing in today's scripture reading. But before we merely brush these stories off as just a few more miracles that Jesus performed, let's see if there isn't a bit more to them. I assure you there is.

Let's begin by looking back to see what happen prior to these two healing stories. Jesus had a rough and busy couple of weeks. He found out his cousin, John, was beheaded unjustly. On the heels of that he had 5,000 plus people show up for dinner, and he fed them. Crowds were following him all over the place to witness his healing power or to be healed themselves. There hardly was time for him to come up for air.

So, Jesus decided it was time to try and get away from it all for a while. He ventured, with his disciples, into a Gentile neighborhood near Tyre. There he entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Unfortunately, things did not go as planned. Somehow a Syro-Phoenician woman found out he was there and immediately interrupted his time away before it really even got started.

The woman is pushy as she pleads for help for her demon-possessed daughter. While the encounter between this woman and Jesus includes an act of healing, the emphasis falls not on the healing but on the circumstances of the woman and the exchange she has with Jesus.

As evidenced so often in the life story of Jesus and his ministry, he came and turned the world upside-down. The mere fact that he wandered into a Gentile city to find rest points out that he didn't follow social norms or even the old traditional religious norms of the Jews. A good Jew steered clear of the Gentiles. They were unclean. They were not the chosen people of God. If that wasn't a good enough reason to ignore and avoid them, then the fact that many of the Gentiles worshiped other gods was.

This story, however, is saturated with a different lesson. At first glance we might think Jesus was going to comply with Jewish understandings when the woman asks for help. What Jesus said to the woman at first can be disturbing to us. He said, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." He said what? This is not exactly an uplifting compliment, is it? It is a comment that we might expect from an over-zealous Pharisee—not Jesus.

Jesus' initial response is sometimes softened by commentators, by asserting that the Greek word used here for dogs, does not mean wild dogs, but household pets. Jesus, nevertheless, was bluntly confronting the woman with the priority of the Jews being the chosen people of God, a point that is reaffirmed time and time again in the New Testament. The point being that the opening of the door wide to the Gentiles was not a rejection of the Jews' chosenness despite their preoccupation with the Pharisees' law, which we looked at last Sunday.

As we read, the woman was not satisfied with Jesus' answer, so she pushes him on the issue. She did not argue the point that the Jews were God's chosen people; but she questions whether there isn't a place for the Gentiles in God's world. The meaning in the woman's rebuttal is that the little dogs that are house pets can become a part of the family and even receive food for nourishment. Likewise, the Gentiles are a part of God's creation, God's beloved family, and they need God nourishment too.

Jesus was very impressed with the woman's reply and so he healed her daughter. Notice that the scripture says inverse 29, "For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter." Unlike other times he did not say something like, "because of your faith, you have

been healed." He understood that she knew little about God whom the Israelites worshiped, and so a response from the woman to what Jesus said likely would not have been faith-based. But at the same time, Jesus announced his own way to his disciples and anyone else who was listening that, in fact, the door was open to the Gentiles to know God. He came to be their Savior too.

In the second story we read, Jesus healed a deaf and mute man...in the predominately Gentile region of the Decapolis. This story of healing focuses on different details than the previous story. Here we are told more about the elaborate steps taken to restore the man's healing and speech. This story affirms the divine healing power Jesus had over any and all ailments. God's dynamic power lived in and through Jesus, giving us evidence of his presence in our world.

This man must have had some good caring friends who took him to Jesus. Jesus took the man aside and, well, he did what? He stuck his fingers in the man's ears and he put some of his spittle on the man's tongue. We might think this to be disgusting, but in those days the people believed that spittle had a curative quality. So, just because we are living in sanitizing extreme days, let's not get hung up on that detail and miss what is really playing out in this story.

The fact is that Jesus took the man aside to be alone with him. This shows the tenderness and sensitivity of Jesus. It's not easy being deaf. It's not a handicap that everyone can see. Of course, the deaf person knows he or she cannot hear, but not everyone around them may know. Therefore, people may shout at them trying to make them hear. It can be very embarrassing for the one who cannot hear. Jesus will have none of that. Jesus understood life was already difficult for this man.

The whole story shows us that Jesus did not just see this man as just another healing case. Jesus saw this man as an individual, having special needs, and having a particular problem, and he addressed the man's special needs with tenderness and understanding specific to his hardship.

Of course, when the man returns to the crowd, it becomes very apparent that he can suddenly hear. Jesus did it again! He performed a miracle—the deaf and mute man could now hear and speak. Jesus commanded the people to keep silent about what he did. He did what? Did he really think people would not say anything about this? Did he really think that the man who could now hear and speak would remain silent? Everyone who ever knew him would wonder what happened to make this unfortunate soul well.

It seems that whenever Jesus would make such a command after doing something miraculous, which the bible tells us he did on several occasions, it just made the witnesses more zealous about sharing the good news about this miracle worker. They just could not keep silent about this amazing man named Jesus. The crowds who spread the amazing stories of Jesus and his power become the model for the church as those amazed beyond comprehension, fervently spreading the word.

So, Jesus did what?!? He turned the world upside down, and that's exactly what we need to be doing. We already know that we are God's children—loved and adored by him. We know God is with us at all times and in all circumstances. We know God is aware of and tenderly attends to our individual needs. We know his grace as it washes us clean of our imperfections and sin.

Praise be to our Savior, Jesus Christ, who shook things up as he lived among the people long ago to reveal to the world the true nature of God. Praise be to the Holy Spirit, who inspired others to shake things up in our lives, making us aware of God's nature and the Savior's ways. It is because of this shake-up that we know the way of salvation.

September 5, 2021 - "He Did What?"

And it is now our calling, with the indwelling of the Spirit, to shake things up with gospel living, as Jesus did, in our neighborhoods, where we live, work and play, and here where we worship. We may even need to shake things up with gospel living among our friends and family. We need to tell, NO, we need to show the world that Jesus came to be the light of hope, love and joy as the Savior for all people, not just us.

Like Jesus, we need to listen to and try to understand the needs of others whom no one else will listen to, respecting them and their unique needs, and addressing those particular needs with tenderness and care.

This is something the Sunday School class I taught over Zoom during this pandemic talked about in our study of missional ministry on several occasions. It's not necessarily helpful when we do things for or say things to those in need that are not relevant to their lives, or the culture in which they live. Our best efforts, while well intended, can be misinterpreted as imposing particular ideals that are not pertinent to their lives; or they can be misconstrued as insensitive to their issues that they deal with every day. We need to be like Jesus when it comes to meeting people's particular needs, especially if we want them to experience Jesus in us.

That's what we really want, isn't it? We want people to meet Jesus, to know he loves them and cares about them. We want people to experience his very presence with them, giving them hope to fill an otherwise emptiness in their lives. We want those living lives lost to sin, to know there is a better way, a way that takes away the burden sin leaves on their conscience along with the weight of feeling trapped with no way to escape repetitive sin. There are too many people who have fallen into deep pits. Some were born into those pits. Let's reach down and help them get out. We want people to know Jesus—that's the plain and simple truth.