

September 5, 2021. Rev. Kathryn McGinnis

Let us pray,

Open us, Eternal God, to your Word read and proclaimed. Help us not to turn from your truth, or avoid and distract ourselves from your message. Help us be receptive to the wisdom you offer in this worship moment. Amen.

Our scripture for this morning comes from the Gospel of Mark, chapter 7, verses 24 through 37. Listen now for the word of the Lord.

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. **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.”

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Our scripture for this week, on the surface, seems pretty simple: two healing stories back to back that show Jesus’s love and grace and glory. Both stories have someone suffering from an infirmity that isolates them from society: the young girl has a demon and the man was deaf. Both have someone intercede on their behalf: the woman and the crowd.

Both have an element of privacy: in the first story Jesus retreats privately and in the second he heals the deaf man privately.

And in both stories, Jesus heals them. But if you read the scripture again, and then again, you might find that with each time you read it over, you feel a bit more and more uncomfortable, and each time you read it over again and again, verse 27 grows larger and larger until you find it dominates the whole narrative.

You cannot see anything else. Verse 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.”

Jesus says these words to the gentile, Syrophenician woman when she begs him to heal her little daughter who is possessed by a demon.

And the reality is, Jesus’s response to her plea for help doesn’t match the kind, loving, Jesus with open arms that we’re used to. Up to this point, Jesus has never refused a plea for help.

But here he says no, and his response is really just mean and abrasive.

You see, Mark tells us the woman is a Gentile - and the region of Tyre is gentile territory.

So when Jesus says let the children be fed first - the children refer to the people of Israel, the Jewish people.

And when he says it’s not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs - Jesus is calling her, this gentile woman, a dog.

Amy C Howe explains it plainly: “Jesus is telling this desperate woman that his mission is for the Jews and the Jews alone. He calls her a dog. Some commentaries have suggested that the word ‘dog’ is not as harsh as it sounds, that Jesus is merely referring to her as a pet. No. The word is ‘dog,’ and dog is what he means.”

It’s a harsh reality to face: that Jesus would call this woman who is desperately pleading for her daughter’s life, a dog that didn’t deserve to be fed - but it’s a reality we must face.

Sure, there are certain things to take into consideration: Jesus went into the house to be alone. Not to see people or perform more miracles. He was likely tired and exhausted, and this woman barged in on his personal space - I think we can all relate to snapping and saying a mean word out of exhaustion and frustration.

We also know that the Jews in the region of Tyre were not treated well by the political leaders - so perhaps Jesus already had a bias against the Gentile woman, associating her with the leaders who oppress his people.

But even taking all that into consideration: we're still faced with the reality of perhaps an imperfect Jesus. A Jesus who has shortcomings, who has a temper, a Jesus who perhaps needs to be himself straightened out?

For what is even more remarkable about this scripture is not Jesus calling this woman a dog - but her response back to him: verse 28: But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

In this one sentence and one sentence alone she accepts the insult - she accepts being a dog - but she refuses to be victimized by it: she turns the tables back on Jesus - that even dogs deserve to be fed. Even if it's only the crumbs left behind.

The impact of these words are monumental. As Loye Ashton explains:

"Could the story of the Syrophenician woman be a kind of 'conversion' moment for Jesus, in which he realizes how (maybe in a very human moment of physical and mental exhaustion) he has lost sight of the point of his mission and has to be reconnected with it by someone assumed to be outside it?"

If so, then the Syrophenician woman follows in the footsteps of the great Old Testament prophets Moses, Samuel, and Isaiah who intercede on the peoples behalf, who rebuke God for being absent when justice is required.

She rebukes Christ - and opens him up: up to a reality that which Jesus perhaps just needed to be reminded of: that God's Kingdom spreads beyond just the Jewish people. It's a kingdom where even lowly street dogs are perhaps fed first.

Does it work? Do her words move him? Well, we immediately see the answer - For Jesus is opened. For saying her wise words, he heals her daughter without question, and then immediately heals a deaf man in gentile territory.

We don't explicitly know whether or not he is Jewish or Gentile (he is in gentile territory) - but perhaps the lack of clarification is an answer within itself.

Jesus does not care whether this man is Jewish or Gentile.

The Syrophenician woman has reminded him both are children of God. Jesus opens the deaf man up to hear and be healed - just as Jesus himself is opened.

The Syrophenician woman's brave and bold actions and words make plain the tension of Christ: that he is both fully human and fully Divine.

To be human is to be imperfect, to have shortcomings, to have moments we're not proud of, moments and shortcomings that cause us to away from God, to sin.

But to be human is also to have the capacity for change, to be opened, to turn back to God.

In that moment with the Syrophenician woman, Jesus experienced the fullness of his humanity: both his human shortcoming and the human capacity to be opened.

The way Jesus faces his humanity is a lesson for us all: He did not close off and become meaner when he realized he was wrong. He allows himself to be stunned, outwitted, and redirected by this lowly woman and her bold words.

And God's kingdom expands because of it. For the reality is - most all of us in Jesus's response would be the dogs begging for scraps under the table of God's chosen.

In this moment, where our own tensions run high in our country and our communities, where politics sometimes just feels like screaming matches between two groups of people who refuse to even look each other in the eye, and because of it, no progress or change is seen for the communities and people who need it the most:

Jesus shows us an invaluable lesson. We must allow ourselves to be opened - perhaps by those whom our human shortcomings cause us to lash out.

To be stunned by them. To realize when we are wrong - and allow THEM to redirect us. To change us. To have them turn us back to God. And in this same moment, the Syrophenician woman, too, teaches us an invaluable lesson: To be bold and wise

To prophetically and bravely rebuke those who would exclude us, or any, from God's kingdom, from God's justice, from God's healing grace. For maybe even we, in our mere humanity can open others. Cause them to change.

Dare we say even cause them to turn back to God. The beauty of this scripture is that it is anything but two simple healing stories back to back.

Every time you read it, again and again, you discover another layer of the complexity that is humanity: it's darkness, its scars - but also its vulnerability, its beauty, its capacity to be opened. To change. And the God who is both fully human and fully divine encapsulates it all: and shows us it is worth dying for.

For perhaps there is nothing more powerful than a God who was crucified not only for our sins, but maybe even his own.

Thanks be to God. Amen.