

Pastor's Message – 9/5/2021  
Mark 7:24-37

Summer is winding to a close, vacations are ending, but we all have stories from our vacations and, today in our Bible passage from the gospel of Mark, we hear two stories from Jesus' vacation. There are two stories, but I want to focus more on the first.

In our Bible reading today, Jesus goes to Lebanon for a vacation, and there encounters a local woman whose begging ultimately convinces him to free her daughter from a demon. Returning to Galilee, and re-entering the region of the Decapolis – the region of the Ten Towns - (where he had cast out a legion of demons), Jesus heals a man who could not hear or speak. The more he ordered others not to speak of this, the more they seemed to spread it abroad.

Jesus was on vacation. He didn't want anyone bothering him. And he apparently had gone there with no intention of doing any preaching or healing. But then, this woman comes in. This woman pushed every boundary the culture or Jesus himself had tried to set. She was a female addressing a rabbi. She was a Syro-Phoenician, and thus from a people long considered enemies to the people of Israel. Her daughter was demon-possessed. She might have been described, then, as "inferior, enemy, evil" – or more simply "unclean, unclean, unclean!" The only way she could have been any lower or more despised by "respectable" people would have been for her to have been a leper as well.

She is a foreigner. She is like a dog, Jesus suggests, compared to the children of Israel. But the woman hangs in there. Tracking Jesus down and asking anything of him required more than a little chutzpah.

This passage does not show Jesus in His best light. Jesus comes across as a bit harsh, unkind, and narrow-minded. And it's a tough passage to preach and to listen to. As such, it might be easier to simply avoid dealing with this Scripture and preach on something else today. Perhaps just ignore this part and go on to the next story, where Jesus is seen not only responding to a deaf man with a speech impediment, but actually curing him of his problems.

Unfortunately, God's word is not always easy, and the lectionary does not always allow us to avoid the more challenging passages from the Bible.

It may be a difficult passage because we may have been taught and we may want to believe that Jesus is perfect. It borders on blasphemy to think that Jesus might not know everything and still could be taught – by a woman, no less, with all of her other baggage. However, Scripture tells us that Jesus, although He was divine, was also fully human and therefore didn't know everything – He was still learning.

That shouldn't be so surprising when we remember Luke 2.52 where it says, "Jesus increased in wisdom and years." He was growing and learning. Why would He stop learning in adulthood?

But perhaps there's another explanation. It's possible that we're not hearing the exchange the way the woman did. Commentator N.T. Wright describes the conversation as "teasing banter," and some others call it "sparring." The point for us to notice today is that, if sparring is what's going on, then Jesus' comments to her about the puppies is, in fact, not rude, but an invitation to her to be his sparring partner. And, if that's the case, he's *honoring* her with this invitation, because rabbinical sparring is a role explicitly denied to women in that time.

Certainly the woman didn't expect such an invitation, but she doesn't hesitate for even a nanosecond to dish it right back at Jesus: "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs," she says.

Now, we can almost see Jesus nodding his head in admiration when the woman fires this at him. Perhaps he's even smiling. He tells her to go home, for her daughter is healed.

With either explanation, the word of God comes through the woman, not through Jesus. In the end, with either explanation, Jesus honors the woman, and we learn that Jesus' ministry, and ours as His followers, is to all people, not just to those who are like us.

I once heard an article on National Public Radio about a Pastor who was serving a city church, I don't remember where anymore, which was experiencing declining membership and decreased worship attendance. It seems the folks who had been part of that

Church had been moving out of the city and not staying with that church in the city.

The article told of a Black woman who, she said, was inspired to attend that church one Sunday, was not well-received, but who kept going back. She, in turn, inspired the pastor to change the direction of the church and start reaching out to and inviting the people of the neighborhood. Some of the church folk were not too happy with that, but the church, as it welcomed different people, instead of dying, began to thrive again.

Our gospel lesson for today reminded me of another story that I had heard a while ago. The story revolves around a frazzled young mother who had locked her sick toddler in the car while she ran into the pharmacy, no drive-thru at that pharmacy, to pick up an emergency prescription. You can guess what happened: She left the keys in the ignition. It was late at night, she didn't have a cell phone, and the pharmacy had locked its doors and pulled down its metal shutters by the time she realized what she'd done. She could see her daughter through the windows, and could hear the sound of her crying. It drove her nearly frantic and she tearfully prayed for help.

A few moments later, a young man walked past and turned to look at her in curiosity. "Can you help me?" she begged him desperately. "I've locked my keys in the car and my daughter is in there!" He nodded, and looked around the empty parking lot until he found an old coat hanger that he straightened.

She had never seen anything like it — it was simply amazing how easily he got into her car. A quick look at the door and window, a couple of twists of the coat hanger and voila! Just like that, the door was open.

When she saw the door open she threw her arms around him. "Oh," she said, "the Lord sent you! You're such a good boy. You must be a Christian!"

He stepped back and said, "No ma'am, I'm not a Christian, and I'm not a good boy. I just got out of prison yesterday."

She jumped at him and she hugged him again — fiercely. "Bless the Lord!" she cried. "He sent me a professional!"

The gospel got me wondering today, if Jesus needed to learn evangelism, maybe we do too. If Jesus needed to learn and

reconsider who His ministry was for, maybe we do too. I started to wonder this week who it would be that we wouldn't be comfortable with in this church? Would it be a dreadlock-wearing Black youth from any inner city? Would it be an arm-raising, "Praise the Lord" shouting evangelical who wanted to change from hymns to Praise and Worship courses? Or would it be someone like us who should know the rules but doesn't do things exactly right? Maybe they don't know that the cole slaw always goes in the green bowls and never in the yellow bowls.

This week we have two stories that have both similarities and differences. If we really look at the stories that Mark tells this week, we'll notice that neither the woman nor the "people" who begged Jesus to lay hands on the deaf man with the speech impediment asked for anything for themselves. The woman was an advocate for her daughter; the people for the deaf man.

We don't know who "the people" were. Were they family members? Friends? Neighbors? This omission is a reminder that we all are called to ask, pray for, and care for others. Following Jesus is less about us than it is about serving others.

The woman begs Jesus. "The people" beg Jesus to heal the man. Begging entails humility. Humility implies opening ourselves to others and to the grace that comes from God through Jesus.

Jesus always attracted messy people. These are not people in denial. These are not people who think that they're not sick, or they're not possessed, or they're not needy. They need help, and they need it right away. All of us are messy people and, coming to Jesus, we find grace and the healing touch of the Holy Spirit. We learn today that messy as we are, we still need to be open to other messy people.

Jesus says to the woman, "Now go home, for the demon has left your daughter." Looking up to heaven, [Jesus] sighed and said, "*Ephphatha*," which means, "Be opened!" Instantly the man could hear perfectly, and his tongue was freed so he could speak plainly!

And speak he did; he and others who had witnessed the miracles. As we are open to grace, as we learn to be open with grace, let us also speak plainly: speak plainly the wonderful, welcoming grace of God to all people.