

Christ Episcopal Church  
Dayton, Ohio  
14<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost/Proper 18B  
September 6, 2009

We have a fascinating text today from Mark's Gospel. It tells about the only occasion in the Christian scriptures where someone argued with Jesus and won.

Jesus was apparently trying to take a vacation. He'd left Jewish territory and gone down to the coastal town of Tyre for a little Mediterranean time off. He went to a house where he tried to stay out of sight . . . but he was unsuccessful. Word got out that he was in town.

A woman from Syrophenicia – a Greek-speaking Gentile – had a little daughter with an unclean spirit. (I'm sure that many of us have had a similar experience of our child having an unclean spirit.) Nonetheless, it's a pretty vague diagnosis (this unclean spirit) that could mean anything from demon possession to attention deficit disorder to a contentious nature to having a chronically dirty room. In the ancient world, those may have all been interchangeable . . . since there was no understanding of psychology.

But the important factor here was that the woman was *not a Jew*.

The focus of the text is on the exchange. The woman begs Jesus to heal her daughter. We might expect kind, loving, compassionate Jesus to immediately fulfill her request.

But he says, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

The *children*, of course are the *children of Israel*. Jesus understands that he's called to serve the Jews. He's not going to waste their food on one like her . . . a Gentile dog . . . a female, Gentile dog.

Now don't imagine here that Jesus is talking about the family pet. "Dog" means those disgusting scavengers that live in the streets, living off garbage.

But the woman is not to be put off. Without missing a beat she replies, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." And Jesus says, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter."

A common interpretation of this text is that Jesus changed his mind . . . and he realized that his calling was broader than just to the people of Israel. The Messiah is called to bring Good News to all humanity—not just to his own kindred, country, and co-religionists.

Given that Jesus has already performed a healing of a Gentile two chapters earlier (the story of the demoniac of the tombs back in chapter 5), the rude response to the woman seems out of place if Mark's only interested in using this story to emphasize the universal nature of the Gospel.

The first part of this seventh chapter is about the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees who criticized Jesus for ignoring the law by allowing his disciples to eat without the required ritual hand washing. Jesus pointed out that many of them took money that was needed to care for elderly parents and gave it instead as their tithes to the temple. Then they told the poor parents, "Sorry, but we had to do God's work first."

He then quoted the prophet Isaiah, "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me . . ." It is hypocrisy of the highest order to use your religion and it's rules to avoid meeting the neighbors' (or the parents') need.

And just a few verses later St. Mark has Jesus hear himself say, "Let the children be fed first, for it's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." "My religious obligation to feed my own people requires that I not waste the food on Gentile dogs," he says. And the woman's response confronts Jesus with his own hypocrisy.

Could the story of the Syrophoenician woman be more about the conversion of Jesus than about a miracle healing? Or better stated, is this story, rather, about the healing of Jesus from a kind of close-mindedness?

Context is everything here. The story of the woman is followed immediately by this one:

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. (In short, Jesus was still in Gentile territory.)

They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.

Whatever else these stories may be about—miracles and healings of Gentiles—they are primarily about Jesus. Jesus, in his humanity, was clearly able to live and love so deeply, that he was in touch with the divinity within himself and in others. When the Syrophoenician woman confronted Jesus with her pain and the hurt of her child, she exposed Jesus' own hypocrisy. And he saw in her the same humanity possessed by his own people as well as the image of divinity that infuses all living beings. Jesus was opened!

As he said to the deaf man, “Ephphatha,” “Be opened.”

We’re presented here with *Ephphatha Theology*. This’s an understanding that divinity can, and does, infuse all of life.

What are the implications for you and me?

We’re living in very difficult times . . . a time of uncertainty, of fear, of anxiety. We’re daily exposed to the latest tragedies – at home and abroad. We hear and experience job losses and shootings and foreclosures and bankruptcies. We have genocide in some countries and wars that seem to have no end. New viruses and old diseases threaten our existence. The environment is threatened.

The natural tendency is to hunker down, to close ourselves off from others, to cut ties with the stranger, to refuse to hear the point of view of those who disagree with us. It’s appalling that we apparently cannot have conversations about healthcare without shouting and hate-speech. It’s appalling that we can’t have civil conversations about guns, about immigration, about drugs, about religion, about the beginning of life, about sexual orientation.

Too often we are closed to one another.

The message from Mark is clear. If Jesus Christ could be confronted with his hypocrisy—with his close-mindedness, then we as his people are asked to do the same. Be open.

Be open to the other. Be open to other points of view. Be ready to accept that divinity and humanity can be present in the stranger, present in the other point of view.

When Jesus was rude, he repented. He turned around. He blessed the one who confronted him. He opened himself to the other. As with so many other biblical texts, the clear implication is, “Go and do likewise.”

Amen.