

“BE OPENED”
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Text: Mark 7:24-37

Jesus heals a Gentile woman’s daughter and a man who cannot speak.

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, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. 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.” But she answered him, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” Then he said to her, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.” So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

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. 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 aside 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. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, “He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.”

This morning we have a type of story that’s very common in the gospels—a healing story. In fact we have two. First we have a story about a woman asking Jesus to heal her daughter. Then we have a story about Jesus healing a man who’s deaf and can’t speak. So, let’s take them one at a time and try to see how they’re connected.

The first story starts out in a pretty conventional way, with someone coming to Jesus and asking him for healing. In this case, it’s a mother asking on behalf of her daughter, who’s possessed by an unclean spirit. Unlike what happens in every other healing story, however, Jesus refuses to

help her, saying, “it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

Obviously, that doesn’t sound like the Jesus we know. The Jesus we know would never treat someone like that, especially someone who’s desperately in need. So, what’s going on here?

Well, when it comes to interpreting this story, people usually go in one of two directions. Some people try to explain away the harshness of Jesus’ tone by saying it’s not as bad as it sounds. They argue, for instance, that the word Jesus uses for “dog” was actually a term of affection, more like “puppy” or “pet.” Other people lean into the

harshness. They argue that this is simply Jesus' human side coming through. He was physically and emotionally exhausted, he was trying to get away from the crowds that were constantly hounding him, and this woman interrupted his quiet time. So, he lost his temper. Who can blame him?

Personally, I'm not so sure about either one of those approaches. I think they both go a little too far. Clearly, there's an edge in Jesus' voice, and we can't just ignore it because it messes up our image of him. But that doesn't mean we have to see him as someone with anger management issues. Like most things in life, I think the truth of the matter is somewhere in the middle.

One thing we know for sure about Jesus is that he uses language to meet people where they are. When he's talking to farmers, he uses agricultural metaphors. When he's talking to fishermen, he uses fishing metaphors. And in this case, when he's talking to a mother, he uses a parenting metaphor.

She wants him to heal her daughter. But the problem is, she's a Gentile, a non-Jew, and he sees his healing ministry as something that's only for Jews. So, he can't take what's meant for his own people and give it to someone else.

But he's not being mean about it. There's a line here that he thinks he can't cross. He thinks he was sent to Israel and only Israel, and his ministry stops at the border. And he's trying to get this woman to understand that by asking her, as a mother, "Would it be fair to your children if you took their food and used it to feed your dogs?" As far as he's concerned, the answer is, "Of course not." It would be irresponsible of any parent to do that. Just like it would be irresponsible of him to heal someone who isn't Jewish, someone who's not part of that cultural and religious group.

So, in his mind, it's not a matter of whether he feels sympathy for this woman. It's not a matter of whether he wants to help

her. There's simply nothing he can do. His hands are tied. But his mind is about to be opened. And the person he has to thank for that is this foreign woman, this outsider, who turns out to be pretty sharp.

Notice she doesn't even try to argue with Jesus or confront him about his narrow-mindedness. She's dealt with men before, and she knows the direct approach isn't going to work. So, after he gets done mansplaining why he can't help her, she does a little side-step and uses his own metaphor to challenge him. She says, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

What she means is, the Jewish people may be the focus of Jesus' ministry. They may be the children seated at the table, waiting for their parent to feed them. But she and her daughter still have a place at the table, even if it's underneath it. And that's fine by her because she believes that even a little bit of Jesus' healing will go a long way. She trusts that even a few crumbs worth will be enough to get her daughter's life back.

And Jesus is so moved by her faith—or perhaps so shamed by it—that he immediately changes his tune. "For saying that," he tells her, "you may go—the demon has left your daughter."

So this is a story about Jesus' mind being opened so he can embrace a larger vision of what his ministry is about. If this woman is willing to put her daughter's life in his hands, the least he can do is meet her where she is, not just with words, but with actions. The least he can do is cross the line that separates them and bring God's love to her.

And the thing is, once he does that, there's no going back. Once he sees this woman as a human being, who's capable of perceiving the power of God at work in him, he'll start to see all Gentiles that way. And what was once meant only for Jewish people will now be available to all people.

And if there's any question about that, all you have to do is keep reading.

As soon as he heals the woman's daughter, Jesus starts heading home to Israel, and along the way, another person is brought to him for healing—a man who's deaf and has some kind of issue with his speech. So, Jesus takes the man aside, puts his fingers in his ears, touches his tongue, looks up to heaven and says, "Be opened." And immediately the man can hear and speak plainly. And when you think about it, that's exactly what just happened to Jesus.

Both these stories are about someone being opened up in some way to the world around them; and both these stories are about someone being given the ability to interact in some way with the world around them. The man's ears are opened; Jesus' mind is opened. The man can now talk to his family and friends and neighbors; Jesus can now respond to the woman's need. And that's not a coincidence. Mark does this kind of thing all the time. He uses one story to clarify or comment on another.

So really, what we have this morning is not just two healing stories, but three. The woman's daughter is healed. The deaf man is healed. And Jesus is healed—he's healed of the notion that God's love can be confined within human boundaries; he's healed of the belief that only some people are God's people.

And now it's up to us, as his followers, to live into the larger vision he was given by going out into the world with a sense of humility and respect for everyone we meet, understanding that as we share the gospel with them, who knows what wisdom they might have to share with us—if we're open to it. Amen.