

Being Open to God in a Crisis

15 Pentecost B Sept 5, 2021 Rev. Dr. David Gardner Tweed

Gospel: Mark 7:24-37

In Mark's gospel, encounters with women usually signify turning points in Jesus' ministry. Here, a conversation with a Syrophenician woman marks the beginning of his mission to the Gentiles.

²⁴From there he set out & went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house & did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, ²⁵but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, & she came & bowed down at his feet. ²⁶Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food & throw it to the dogs." ²⁸But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." ²⁹Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." ³⁰So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, & the demon gone. ³¹Then he returned from the region of Tyre, & went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. ³²They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; & they begged him to lay his hand on him. ³³He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, & put his fingers into his ears, & he spat & touched his tongue. ³⁴Then looking up to heaven, he sighed & said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." ³⁵& immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, & he spoke plainly. ³⁶Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. ³⁷They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear & the mute to speak."

Overview

God is partial to caring for the poor, the weak, & the outcast. Which is why, perhaps, Jesus' response to the Syrophenician woman takes us by surprise: "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food & throw it to the dogs" (v27). The woman acts in faith. She engages Jesus with what she believes to be true about him: that through him God's mercy will extend even to her. Despite the distinctions that separate them (including race, gender, & religion), she believes Jesus is a Savior who has the power to heal all people & that she, although not a Jew, is a member of the household of God. Other scriptures appointed for today remind hearers that the

Christian community's actions are to be shaped by God's partiality. God has chosen the poor to be rich in faith. While the world values the rich, the poor are God's own treasure, made honored guests & royal heirs through baptism. The community is called to a partiality based on God's values, not the world's. The waters of baptism wash away all distinctions. Like streams breaking forth in the desert, these waters surprise us with mercy in unexpected places. These waters open our eyes, unstop our ears, & loose our tongues to see, hear, & speak God's partiality for the poor, the weak, & the outcast. Baptized into Christ's death & resurrection, the Spirit fills us with faith—a faith active in showing mercy that knows no limits. Around the table, rich & poor, haughty & humble, all who gather receive a feast fit for the family of God. All are honored & all are fed, because the Lord is the maker of them all.

[Mark 7:24-37](#)

Both of the 2 healing miracles, one of a young, demon-possessed Gentile girl & the other of a deaf man living outside Judea, approach the issue of gentile participation in the Jesus movement. Even Jesus needs to recognize that non-Jews can eat at the table.

Most Christian worshipers are, like the Syrophoenician woman, not Jewish, yet with her we can enter the house of the church, have our demons overcome by Christ, & eat the crumbs from the table. With the mother, we pray for everyone in need of healing. That Jesus speaks the word of God becomes the basis for the story of the deaf man now able to hear. Also, our ears & hearts are opened by the presence of Christ in our midst during worship. Modern scholars interpret the exchange between the woman & Jesus to mean that her need called even Jesus into a fuller understanding of God's grace.

In Galilee, Jesus has challenged official Judaism over the authority of non-biblical traditions & has taught that ritual purity is irrelevant. He now travels to the coast ("Tyre"), a largely Gentile area. The "woman" (v. [26](#)) is Gentile by birth & of non-Jewish origin; she seeks healing for her daughter who (at least in contemporary understanding) is possessed by evil. In Jesus' statement (v. [27](#)), the "children" are presumably Jews; Jewish writers sometimes referred to Gentiles as "dogs". Jesus says that he comes principally to Jews, but note that both Jews & Gentiles are at or near the table. The woman's witty retort (v. [28](#)) shows that she has faith in him: there is a place for non-Jews in God's plan. Jesus accepts her claim (v. [29](#)). The daughter is completely cured (v. [30](#)). After a circuitous journey through Gentile territory, Jesus

heads towards Galilee (v. [31](#)). A man with hearing & speech problems is brought to him. (Laying on of hands (“h&”, v. [32](#)) is known only in the Qumran, Dead Sea, literature & in the Church.) In doing the miracle, Jesus uses two symbols, one for deafness & one for speech. He touches the man’s tongue with spittle (v. [33](#)). Jesus communes with the Father, is moved with compassion (“sighed”, v. [34](#)) & orders the healing. The cure is immediate & again complete (v. [35](#)). In v. [36a](#), Jesus hopes to avoid a partial understanding of him (as a miracle worker) but the good news spreads. The people’s words:

- allude to God’s satisfaction with creation (v. [37b](#), Genesis [1:31](#)) &
- show that the Kingdom of God has begun: v. [37c](#) is a quotation from a section of Isaiah on Israel’s glorious future. The kingdom of God has already begun!

Images in the Readings

Most Christians are, like the Syrophenician woman, **Gentiles**. The New Testament indicates the early church’s debates as to whether non-Jews could be included in God’s salvation. The question has been broadened in recent centuries: Who is the outsider? How ought Christian insiders relate to them? We are all **deaf**. Some Christians with the conditions cited in Isaiah —being blind, deaf, lame, mute...welcome metaphoric speech that likens all persons to them; however, other persons warn against using disabilities as symbols. Use of the term “**the poor**” raises similar concerns. We ought not easily categorize persons as “the poor,” yet neither can we as Christians gloss over the radical disparity in most nations of the world between those with & those without the necessities of life.

Lots of Openings here:

- 1) Jesus geographically opens his ministry in Gentile territory of Tyre.
- 2) Jesus indicates a limited mission for his work but this opens as the woman persists in faith.
- 3) The deaf man’s ears & speech are ‘opened’.
- 4) people with the deaf man are astounded at what they have seen, their minds & hearts opened in a new way.

God desires to be present to us and others – particularly when in crisis. What does our faith and us need to be re-“OPENED” to? Are we prepared to be Open to meet needs when others are in crisis?.... and in so doing show them God in their midst bringing healing & hope?