

Opening Up

First Congregational United Church of Christ

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Text: Mark 7:24-37

There is a risk when we approach scripture by focusing on particular readings on particular Sundays. It is that we will miss the larger forest for the individual trees. A friend of mine who is a pastor told me how her father, also a pastor, taught his grandson an important lesson about how we should read the Bible. My friend's father was in the hospital, and thus was not going to be able to attend his grandson's confirmation the next day. When the young man appeared at his bedside, the grandfather presented him with a flashlight. "Tomorrow you'll receive your confirmation Bible," he reminded his grandson. "When you read the Bible, don't read it with a magnifying glass, examining each individual word, but read it with a flashlight, so that when you look at a particular verse, you'll be able to see all the other verses around it."

That's especially good advice for reading the Gospel of Mark, because Mark, more obviously than the other gospel-writers, seems to have designed his gospel as a kind of dramatic narrative. It has a dramatic beginning, not with an account of Jesus' birth, but with a mission statement: "The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ." And the suspense builds, as we learn, miracle by miracle, parable by parable, the nature of that Good News. The suspense has to do with Jesus' gradual

self-disclosure, the things he said and the deeds he did that told the readers of the Gospel something about who Jesus was and who Jesus is.

And there's a geographical component to this suspense. Jesus' life is presented as a kind of pilgrimage. The first part of his ministry was in Galilee, where Jesus' hometown of Nazareth was located. There he became so famous that, as we read last week, scholars and religious leaders from Jerusalem came to watch him, to hear him, and, of course to test him. The second half of the gospel follows Jesus on his journey back to the center of things, Jerusalem. Over half of one of Mark's sixteen chapters, the passage we read last week, was devoted to what was essentially a food fight, an argument about the laws of ritual purity and food. In today's reading, Jesus has ventured into new territory, into the Gentile territory of Tyre and Sidon, precisely because he wanted to get away; he wanted to be somewhere people wouldn't know him. Perhaps he needed some rest. Perhaps his encounter with the religious authorities had stirred things up, and he needed to put some distance between himself and those intent on discrediting him or worse.

Jesus had already crossed a religious boundary in Galilee when he questioned the ultimate nature of the Jewish rules and regulations of purity, rules which were the stock and trade of the religious establishment. But now he was crossing a geographic and ethnic boundary as well. He was in unknown territory, Gentile territory, and he was hoping to remain incognito there.

But a bold Syrophoenician woman, a Lebanese, a Gentile, searched him out and traversed her own boundaries in the process. This woman had a daughter who was possessed by a demon. She asked Jesus to heal her daughter. Here are the boundaries this woman crossed: she spoke to Jesus, a man who was not a member of her immediate family, so she had crossed the boundary between males and females; and she, a Gentile, had spoken with a Jew, a rabbi no less, and so had

crossed the boundary between the presumably clean and the assuredly unclean. Jesus responded to her as someone whose religious and cultural sensitivities had been violated might be expected to respond. Using a common term for Gentiles, he called this woman and her daughter dogs. Gentiles were called dogs because they didn't observe the Jewish dietary boundaries; like dogs, Gentiles ate anything. "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and feed it to the dogs," he told her, and even our knowledge of the cultural context doesn't take away the sting of his words.

But the woman persisted. "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." It was both an audacious statement and a humble one. She humbly didn't challenge the derogatory designation Jesus gave her, but bravely persisted in her plea for her daughter's healing. And seeing both her audacity and her humility, Jesus relented, indeed he praised the woman's faith. "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." And so it was that when the woman returned home she found her daughter freed of the demon. Matthew's version of this episode is even more emphatic in Jesus' praise of the woman: "Great is your faith," he exclaimed.

There's no getting around it. This is a difficult passage. Jesus' initial reaction to the Syrophenician woman was legalistic, patronizing, dismissive, even downright cruel. The man who had outraged the Pharisees in Galilee by his willingness to go beyond the boundaries of the law for a greater good was being judgmental and dismissive toward a desperate woman in Lebanon who just wanted to save her daughter. Some scholars have argued that Jesus was just testing the woman, probing the limits of her faith. One scholar even sees this as a playful exchange between a woman who had already heard of the quality and depth of Jesus' compassion, and Jesus, who simply wanted to elicit a faithful response from her. He imagines this exchange as being accompanied by winks and smiles.

It's an interesting interpretation if you desperately want to believe in and focus on Jesus' omniscience and his divinity, but at the heart of the Christian faith is our belief that Jesus was both divine and human. And one of the attributes of being human is our ability to make mistakes, to change our minds, and so to change our lives. Jesus had passed one boundary within the Jewish tradition when he challenged the laws about the Sabbath and about ritual purity, and now this woman was pushing him over another boundary when she challenged his view of her status as a woman and as a Gentile. Jesus was, in other words, still a work in progress. His eyes were opened to this woman's humanity and to her faith; and his ears were opened to her pleas not only for healing her daughter but more fundamentally for being respected and loved as a child of God. In a drama, we would call this "character development." Jesus changed his mind, and this change affected the very nature of his ministry.

Immediately following his encounter with the Syrophenician woman, Jesus set out for Galilee again, taking what seems to be a roundabout way through the city of Sidon. There people brought him a deaf man who had a speech impediment. Jesus took the man aside, put his fingers into the man's ears, and then spat on his fingers and touched the man's tongue. Then he looked to the heavens, groaned aloud, and said *ephphatha*, which means "open!" in Aramaic. And suddenly the man could hear, and he could speak plainly.

My uncle Albert was born deaf and he was unable to speak. My mother and her four sisters communicated with Albert by lip-reading and sign language. One of the relatively few times that my mother got really, really angry with me was when, as a child, I referred to Uncle Albert as deaf and dumb. In those days, this wasn't an uncommon way of referring to people who could neither hear nor speak. "He's not dumb!" my mother shouted at me. I never used that term again. But I

remember the kind of sound that Uncle Albert made as he signed with my mother, and as he tried to make the rest of us understand him. It was like a groan, perhaps like the groan that Jesus directed to the heavens as he gave the deaf man his hearing, and gave him the capacity to speak.

Here's what I think that Mark is trying to tell us in this part of his spinning out of the drama of Jesus' life: He's telling us that Jesus wasn't on some kind of divine automatic pilot; he interacted with his environment, just as we interact with ours. He didn't enforce his will upon the people who crossed his path, he really spoke with them and he really heard them. There's a dynamic at work here. Even as Jesus changed the lives of others, they changed his. When he was questioned by the Pharisees about his disciples' lack of regard for ritual purity, he told them to "open up," to look at the law not as a burden but as God's gift to us so that we might live fuller and more faithful lives. When he tried to dismiss the Gentile woman who pled for her daughter's healing, she told him to "open up," to see her humanity, to hear her human cries. She told him he had to change his very view of the world. And her boldness shocked him into seeing her and hearing her. Having opened himself in this way, he could do no other than to open the ears of the deaf man who was brought to him, and to loosen his tongue. *Ephphatha*.

In a baptismal service designed by Martin Luther, the pastor was instructed to do with the infant being baptized what Jesus did with the deaf man. He (and in Luther's time the pastor was inevitably a "he") was to put his fingers into the child's ears, then moisten his finger with his own saliva, and then touch the child's tongue with his finger. My guess is that the first baptism I did that way in this church would probably be my last baptism in this church.

But Luther had the symbolism just right. To be a follower of Christ means always to be capable of having our ears opened to the cries of others, and to having our

tongues freed to speak of what we have experienced of God's love. Jesus, God's child, had his world turned upside down not by a learned scholar, but by a Gentile woman of faith. Who might turn your world upside down? Are you open to that? Jesus opened the ears and freed the tongue of a man who had been enclosed by his deafness and his enforced silence. Who might you open, through your deeds or through your words, to the love of God? *Ephphatha!* Open up!

Amen.