

Sunday, September 9, 2018
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 18 (Year B)
Mark 7.24-37
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Maybe it's because we are now into September and the time for vacations is essentially over, but I found myself wondering, "did Jesus ever took a vacation?" What we hear in today's Gospel is actually, for all intents and purposes, Jesus' attempt at a vacation.

Up until this point in Mark's Gospel, Jesus has been keeping a pretty rigorous schedule of teaching, preaching, and performing healings and exorcisms, and pulling off some major events like the feeding of the 5,000. In the midst of this busyness, he's also had to deal with the grief over the death of his cousin John the Baptist, and heated arguments with the local scribes and Pharisees. After all of this, Jesus naturally needs to get away to recharge. We are told that Jesus "went away to the region of Tyre" (Mk 7.24a)—the province of Syria, or Phoenicia, north of Jesus' home country of Judea. Because word of his miraculous deeds has spread and he has become so well-known in his own country, he feels the only way to truly get away from it all is to leave the country. So, as Mark tells us, Jesus "entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there" (Mk 7.24b).

But Mark then notes, "Yet he could not escape notice" (Mk 7.24c). Word of Jesus' miraculous deeds had even spread into Gentile territory. Jesus is immediately approached by a Syrophoenician woman seeking healing for her daughter who is possessed by a demon. She knows who Jesus is. She has heard the stories. She knows he is a Jewish teacher and miracle worker. And so she takes a big risk. She approaches Jesus even though to do so would break so many social taboos and potentially offend the one she sought help from. She is a woman. She is a foreigner. She is a Gentile. She is religiously unclean. But none of this matters. The only thing that matters is her daughter. So she dares to approach Jesus. And not only that. She dares to speak to him. Another taboo.

The woman comes to Jesus in the humblest and most human way possible, desperate and pleading for her daughter. Even so, he responds in a harsh and dismissive manner. He responds not with empathy, but by dehumanizing her. Jesus seems to put her in her place by speaking of it not being right to give the children's food to "dogs." That what he has to offer is for God's own children alone. For the Jews. And she does not qualify. This is clearly evident from his choice of words. The word translated "dog" is one that Jews commonly used to refer to Gentiles. A term that was indicative of the state of racial and religious separation between Jews and non-Jews. Nonetheless, it was a derogatory term for Gentiles. For they are considered unclean, just as dogs are considered unclean animals.

One commentator posits that "Possibly, in employing this well-known language of Jew about Gentile, Jesus was purposely using terms that the woman would understand as refusal to help." We may wonder where Jesus' compassion was. But there was more to his refusal to help. "There was also explanation in the words of Jesus, for he was saying that God's salvation was through His chosen people and until that mission to the Jews had been completed it must

remain His chief involvement.” (Gordon McMullan, *Reflections on Mark’s Gospel*, quoted in *Synthesis*, Proper 18, September 9, 2018). His mission to the Jews must remain his sole priority.

Yet, the woman does not seem to take offense or feel hurt by this biting remark. She certainly is not deterred. Without missing a beat, the woman responds, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs” (Mk 7.28). I guess she told him! And amazingly enough, Jesus relents and heals her daughter on the spot. Because of this, the Syrophenician woman is the only person in Mark’s Gospel to win an argument with Jesus. And in the process, she teaches Jesus something about the true scope of his ministry.

Some would ask, why wasn’t this obvious to Jesus from the start? To be fair, while Jesus is the Son of God—fully divine—he is also fully human. He is the product of his time, his culture, and his religion. And that worldview was pretty narrow and rigid. That worldview was the starting point for his mission and ministry. One that was initially limited to the Jews. But this is still relatively early in Jesus’ ministry. Mark’s Jesus is still figuring out who he is and what he’s doing. With the help of the Syrophenician woman, Jesus figures out that his mission is bigger than even he thought it was. That his mission is not limited to the Jews, but is really to all people. Through the exchange between the woman and Jesus, her need called Jesus into a fuller understanding of God’s grace, thus beginning Jesus’ expanded mission to the Gentiles.

What I particularly like about the encounter between the Syrophenician woman and Jesus is that he is willing to change. To see that he has been on a narrow path and to be open to expanding the scope of his ministry. To reconsider what he is called to do, who he is called to be, where he is called to go.

The next recorded encounter Jesus has following the Syrophenician woman fully demonstrates this willingness to change. From the region of Tyre, Jesus continues on to the region known as the Decapolis—another Gentile territory. And there, some people bring Jesus a man who is deaf and mute. A man who, by virtue of location, is presumed to be a foreigner, a Gentile. But this time, instead of denying him the healing he seeks, Jesus immediately sets about meeting the need before 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” (Mk 7.33-35).

The word that Jesus uses, “Ephphatha”—be opened—is wonderfully rich in meaning. There is the obvious, physical meaning. Commanding the man’s ears and mouth to be opened. To be opened in healing to allow for hearing and speech to occur. But there is a much deeper, unspoken meaning. In many of the healings that Jesus performs, he does not simply say, “you are healed.” Instead, he often tells the person in need of healing that their faith has made them well. If it is their faith that brings healing, is it not because they have been opened to receiving that gift? Ephphatha. Be opened. Not only be opened to healing, but be opened to the faith that makes the healing possible.

This is an important message for each of us. Not just with respect to healing, but to all areas of our lives as God’s beloved children. Ephphatha. Be opened. Be opened to faith. Be opened to

God's love. Be opened to God's grace. Be opened to God's forgiveness. Be opened to the new life that God promises through his Son. Be opened to all the good things that God desires for us. Ephphatha. Be opened.

I don't think it's a coincidence that this passage about the encounter with the deaf man and Jesus' command to be opened happens to follow the encounter with the Syrophenician woman. What happened in that earlier encounter? Jesus was opened to hearing what the woman had to say. The unspoken message of the Syrophenician woman to Jesus was "Ephphatha!" Be opened!" And he was. Jesus' own ears were opened to hear a new message. Jesus' mind was opened to receiving that message, to view his mission and ministry in a different, more expansive way. Jesus' eyes were opened to see the woman in a different way. But even more, Jesus' heart was opened, to love in a more expansive way.

Jesus' command to the deaf man to be opened came out of his own experience of being opened. Jesus' willingness to be opened and the resulting actions broke down boundaries of geography, gender, ethnicity, and religious purity so that the Kingdom of God might be extended to all who seek it. To all who are opened to receive it.

Some may question how it is that Jesus could be in need of changing. He is, after all, the Son of God. Fully divine and therefore perfect and all knowing. But as I noted earlier, he was also fully human. The product of a human culture and human ways of viewing things. He was still in the early stage of his public ministry. He was in the process of growing into who was called to be. He had to learn what being Messiah truly meant. He was in the process of discovering what his mission and ministry was to be. The fact that he was opened and did change his view of who he was called to minister to demonstrates this unequivocally. That as new needs arise, he is willing and able to adjust to meet those needs. With the goal of ever expanding that mission and ministry so that as many as possible are included in his loving embrace.

We look to Jesus as our model for how to live more fully into the life of faith. He's not just modeling good behaviors and actions. As beings who continually learn and grow, perhaps one of the greatest things our Savior can model for us is how to respond when we may not be on the right track. To model what it means to reassess how we live into our—and his—mission. To model what it means to stand corrected, to face our own deafness, our own shortsightedness, to be opened and to change.

Jesus' command, Ephphatha, has so many meanings for us in our lives of faith. Be opened to others. Be opened to those in need. Be opened to loving. Be opened to caring. Be opened to sharing the Good News. Be opened to change. Be opened to living the Gospel. Be opened to living as God would have us live. Be opened to the life God has called us into.

Just as he himself experienced, Jesus commands us to be opened. That our ears be opened. That our mouths be opened. That our eyes be opened. That our hands be opened. That our minds be opened. And most importantly, that our hearts be opened.

Ephphatha! Be opened!