

# “OPEN EARS – OPEN HEARTS”

A sermon by Ruling Elder Kathy Hartzell  
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio  
September 5, 2021

## Psalm 125 (NRSV)

- <sup>1</sup> Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion,  
which cannot be moved, but abides forever.
- <sup>2</sup> As the mountains surround Jerusalem,  
so the LORD surrounds his people,  
from this time on and forevermore.
- <sup>3</sup> For the scepter of wickedness shall not rest  
on the land allotted to the righteous,  
so that the righteous might not stretch out  
their hands to do wrong.
- <sup>4</sup> Do good, O LORD, to those who are good,  
and to those who are upright in their hearts.
- <sup>5</sup> But those who turn aside to their own crooked ways  
the LORD will lead away with evildoers.  
Peace be upon Israel!

## Gospel Reading Mark 7:24-37 (NRSV)

<sup>24</sup> 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, <sup>25</sup> but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. <sup>26</sup> Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. <sup>27</sup> 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.” <sup>28</sup> But she answered him, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” <sup>29</sup> Then he said to her, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.” <sup>30</sup> So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

<sup>31</sup> 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. <sup>32</sup> They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. <sup>33</sup> He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. <sup>34</sup> Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” <sup>35</sup> And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. <sup>36</sup> Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. <sup>37</sup> They were astounded beyond measure, saying, “He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.”

Because this week’s selection of scripture continues from last week’s reading in Mark chapter 7, I would like to briefly recap what I considered to be an important message. The key takeaway for me from Mark 7: 1-23 dealt with how religious people can get lost in traditions and practice as outward signs of faith and disconnect the intentions of the heart from those actions. It is not to throw away traditions, and practices. Rather, to realign them with a heart that is rooted by faith in God; a faith founded in love. This way of living can bring to life thoughts, words and actions to show the world a faith that knows no defined religious boundaries and reinforces Christ’s

message of God's plan for universal salvation through his unlimited power of redemption.

Christ uses this moment as a reminder to shake us back into the mission at hand and perhaps the scripture read today turn's the reminder from us to Christ, himself.<sup>1</sup> This idea was presented to me in a number of commentaries and speaks to Mark's emphasis throughout his gospel of the nature of Christ, human and divine. When I read the Gospel of Mark, I hear in his telling the human characteristics of Jesus. Sometimes, I relate to how blunt Jesus' comments can be. He doesn't hesitate to call out his disciples about their lack of understanding and faith. For example, in the beginning of Mark 7:18 "He said to them, "Then do you also fail to understand?" This is not the first nor the last time in Mark's Gospel where, to me, Jesus sounds frustrated with them.

When I hear Jesus refer to the Gentile woman as a dog, I am not so stunned as curious as to what would prompt such a reaction. Rereading this scripture, I see that Jesus is trying to get to a place of solitude. He has traveled quite far out of Galilee and into Gentile territory. Prior to this story, Mark tells of how great crowds were gathering in every village Jesus went. In chapter six, Jesus goes to his hometown and is rejected. Then the Pharisees confront him about the integrity of his faith by calling out his dismissal of traditional rituals. Jesus reprimands their hypocrisy and then, in private, must explain it to his followers.

Now Jesus just wants quiet. This is so human of him. I know I become frustrated and can be short-tempered when I feel pressed on all sides. As human, Jesus feels the pain and struggle of finding a human's center in God. Is Mark reminding us the incarnation is no walk in the park? Could it be that in a very human moment of physical and mental exhaustion Jesus loses sight of his mission?<sup>2</sup>

Going back to the scripture, we are told the woman has found her way into the house and fallen at Jesus' feet. She is begging him to help her daughter. Jesus doesn't dismiss her outright. Instead, he tells her in verse 27, "Let the children be fed **first**, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." The New Testament Scholar, William Barclay addresses the use of the term "dog." In fact, the Jewish term was sometimes a term of contempt for the Gentiles. However, the Greek word used here is not the extremely derogatory term of worthlessness but one that means little dog, like a lap dog a family might let lie under their dining table while they eat.<sup>3</sup> There is much written on the cultural and societal implications of this comment. Perhaps that can be another sermon.

I think, in Mark's style of writing, Jesus is being fully human, a bit blunt. For me the word that jumps out most from his statement is the word "first." I interpret this to show that Jesus has intention to bring salvation to the Gentiles. The woman may have caught onto this, too. Now, she could have gotten angry but instead she transformed anger into a gentler statement. "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." (v.28) Take a moment here to imagine Jesus looking at the woman, perhaps thinking, "aren't you being sassy."

---

<sup>1</sup> David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Editors. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*. Year B. Volume 4. Westminster John Knox Press. Louisville KY. 2009. Pg. 46

<sup>2</sup> Feasting. P. 48

<sup>3</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, PA. Revised Edition, 1975. Pgs. 178-179

Could this have been the moment when Jesus is pulled from a more human response and back to the full mission at hand. The biblical commentator, Loye Bradley Ashton, presents the idea that, for Mark, the woman is more than simply quick witted but maybe prophetic. She is the embodiment of Isaiah 49:6, where God says to the servant, “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

Jesus does not reprimand the woman for her witty response. He acknowledges her insight. This speaks to the idea that God provides direction for our lives, often using human agency to do so. Is it possible to see God directing the incarnate Jesus through this woman, too? It seems to me Jesus made the connection; did a quick reorientation of his mission, and what comes next is a full display of Jesus’ divinity as he heals the daughter even though the girl is far from him.

In the next miracle, Jesus’ divine nature is again demonstrated in Mark’s description of the healing. “He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. <sup>34</sup> Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” (Vs. 33-34) Like the other healing miracles, this one attests to the fact that the proclamation of God’s rule is accompanied by radical changes in the lives of the individuals. When we respond to the Gospel our ears are opened and our tongues are released.<sup>4</sup>

These two stories are wonderful examples which reveal Christ’s human and divine nature and God’s compassion and mercy but there are often questions about why Mark placed them one after the other. There are a number of good reasons and as I bring this message to a close, I would like to share three. First, both stories take place in Gentile territory, giving credibility for the mission to the Gentiles as it is grounded in Jesus, himself.

Second, they are a rejection of taboos. The personal interactions and healings give value to people and conditions which were otherwise seen as unclean and to be avoided. In the first part of chapter seven, Jesus declares no food unclean, Mark 7:18-19. In today’s readings, Mark is telling us that Jesus sees Gentiles not as unclean but that they too have their place in the new Kingdom.<sup>5</sup>

Third, both stories show how we reach out for those that cannot reach out for themselves. The mother for her possessed child, the friends for the deaf man, bringing it in closer view, this church as we share prayers, resources, and time: affirming our call to reach out beyond our own congregation, comfort zone, and minister with persons different from ourselves.

This message has been front and center for me as I pursue work in chaplaincy. Today’s scripture reminds us to focus our attention to God and keep pointing others to God as proclaimed by Jesus Christ.<sup>6</sup> For we remember that when Jesus healed people, he not only corrected their physical problems, he also restored them to community.<sup>7</sup> Let us go forward and do the same.

---

<sup>4</sup> Feasting. P. 49.

<sup>5</sup> Barclay. P. 177.

<sup>6</sup> Feasting. 49.

<sup>7</sup> Feasting. P. 46.