

Mark 7: 24-37

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, 'Rabbi, 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 Jesus 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. Jesus 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.'

SERMON:

He didn't mean that... Opa, my dad, would say some provocative things... especially as dementia wiped away more and more of his filters - he spouted opinions about Hitler, about Germany's dominance, about lots of hot topics. He didn't mean that...we'd say... 'he grew up in a very different time and place' we'd offer in his defense. My siblings and I did a lot of mopping up after my dad in his later years, as his grandchildren, caregivers, sometimes strangers, would look at us, confusion and amazement on their faces after he dropped an outrageous statement. Really, he's a kind, thoughtful person. He didn't *really* mean what he just said.

But our scripture today?

"There's no saving Jesus here", says theologian Karoline Lewis¹. No saying 'he didn't mean that...'

There's no explaining away Jesus' remarks. No covering up. But, there's much to learn.

In her commentary², from which much of this sermon comes, Episcopal Priest and writer Debie Thomas challenges the idea of the "Perfect Jesus" that many of us were raised with. Perfect Jesus was technically human, but he never messed up, never fell short, and never had to say he was sorry. He always had perfect reasons for saying the things he said and doing the things he did. If he happened to speak with harshness rather than compassion? If he behaved in ways that were ethnocentric and rude? If he called a hurting, pleading woman a dog? Well, it's Jesus, he had perfectly good reasons for doing so.

The problem with "Perfect Jesus," of course, is that he doesn't exist. The Jesus who appears in the Gospels is not *half*-incarnate. He is as fully human as he is fully God. Which is to say, he struggles, he snaps, he discovers, he grows, falters, learns, fears, and he overcomes. He's real, he's approachable, and he's authentically one of us. The "Good News" is not that we serve a shiny, inaccessible deity who floats five feet above the ground. It is that Jesus shows us—in the flesh—what it means to *grow* as a child of God. **He embodies what it looks like to stretch into a deeper, truer, and fuller comprehension of God's love.**

Our scripture begins with Jesus being far from home in the region of Tyre, that is, Gentile country. We're told: "He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there." We don't know for sure why he's keeping to himself, maybe some combination of physical, emotional, and spiritual exhaustion has led him to seek solitude. The stories in Mark's gospel preceding this one have Jesus

¹

<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/working-preachers-sermon-brainwave/id282364902?i=1000533471986>

² [Be Opened](#)

being mocked and rejected by his own people. He's fed the multitudes, healed the sick, liberated the demon-possessed, and confronted the Pharisees. Maybe Jesus just needs a break.

But a break isn't what he gets. Instead, he gets a Syrophenician woman — an inconvenient outsider who barges into the house where he is staying, bows down at his feet, and begs him to cast a demon out of her daughter.

Our text uses lots of code language to describe this intruder - she's a woman, strike one; a Greek, strike two; and enters the house where Jesus is staying, uninvited, strike three. She just doesn't belong here. And Jesus doesn't want to have anything to do with her.

He looks down at the pleading Gentile woman, ignores her suffering, and dismisses her by responding to her request: "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

Ouch.

Debie Thomas suggests that the Jesus we encounter in this text is fully human — a product of his time and place, shaped as we all are by the conscious and unconscious biases, prejudices, and entitlements of his culture. AND he is God incarnate, a holy Son still working out the scope and meaning of the divine vocation God has given him. He knows he's meant to share the Good News. But even he needs to "be opened" to how radically good that good news is.

So the Syrophenician woman educates him. Turning his slur right back at the man who insults her, she replies, "Rabbi, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

Wow! This encounter - this back and forth - it's an extraordinary moment. This outsider pushes Jesus to see the potential of his ministry and just how far it needs to go. She, in so many words, is saying 'be opened'.

You see, these metaphors of taking the children's food and dogs are referring to the ministry of Jesus being for the Jews - the chosen people, the Children of Israel. That's who Jesus came to teach, preach and save. The dogs are the gentiles - those outside the faith. Up until this point, Jesus has been ministering mostly to *his* people.

After this encounter, we have Jesus leaving this Gentile territory, and taking a circuitous route, not back to the familiar places of Galilee, but to other new spaces - the region of the Decapolis. He sets out on a new course. He's been re-routed by this encounter with this Greek woman.

It's there, in the Decapolis, another gentile space, that Jesus places his fingers in the ears, and touches the tongue of one who is closed up to the outside world. As he does so, Jesus looks up to heaven, sighs, and says, "Be opened."

Metaphorically, our gospel reading this week emphasizes "Be opened."

In the story of Jesus and the Syrophenician woman, it is Jesus *himself* who has to have his eyes opened and his ears unstopped. It's the Son of God who must face his own blind spots, his own rudeness, his own prejudice, and allow himself to "be opened" to the full, glorious, and uncomfortable implications of the gospel he has come to embody.

This Greek mother cuts to the very heart of Jesus's boundary-breaking ministry of table fellowship. After all, he's the Messiah who eats with tax collectors and prostitutes. He's the rabbi who breaks bread with sinners. **The table is where Jesus shows the world who God is.**

Yes, This woman knows: The table is where Jesus shows the world who God is.

And it's at the table where the outsider, the "Other," calls him out. As if to say, "Lord, where's *my* Good News? Where's my place at the table? If you are who you say you are, how can you be content while *anyone* goes hungry in the vicinity of your table?"

This outsider, Gentile woman pushes Jesus beyond his bounds - her provocation is inviting Jesus to expand his understanding of the good news of which he preaches. Look harder. See better, she seems to be saying. Believe that there's enough good news to go around. Expand the circle. Dissolve the boundaries. Widen the table. Preach your Good News *to me.*"

And here's the amazing part - this fully human, fully divine Jesus, he listens. He accepts the instruction of the woman who challenges him. He allows her — the ethnic, religious, and gendered Other — to deconstruct his bias and entitlement. She breaks the barrier of his prejudice.

The Jesus who never loses a verbal contest with anyone else in Scripture sits back in amazement and concedes the argument to an audacious, female foreigner: Our scripture goes on - 'For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.' For saying that... in Greek, *logon, logos*. Jesus proclaims the Word, the *logos*, this woman has spoken as worthy of attention, of changing him.

Jesus *changes*. He allows a perspective foreign to his own to move him from an attitude of prejudice to an attitude of inclusion. He allows himself to be humbled, rearranged, and remade. Author Barbara Brown Taylor describes the moment this way: "You can almost hear the huge wheel of history turning as Jesus comes to a new understanding of who he is and what he has been called to do." The Syrophenician woman's faith and persistence teach him that God's purpose for him "is bigger than he had imagined, that there is enough of him to go around."³

Yes, there's enough of Jesus to go around.

What a Messiah we follow! What a teacher to learn from -

One who humbles himself long enough to learn what only a vulnerable outsider can teach.

³ Taylor, Barbara Brown. 2016. *The Seeds of Heaven: Preaching the Gospel of Matthew*.

Be opened, she pleaded.

Be opened to the truth that God isn't done with you yet.

Be opened to the destabilizing wisdom of people who are nothing like you.

Be opened to the voice of God speaking from places you consider unholy.

In an email to the UMC racial justice group the other day, Joyce Hall shared a TED talk⁴ by Verna Myers, a diversity trainer. Myers says each of us needs "to walk toward your discomfort." In this talk, she challenges her mostly white audience to confront their biases. Biases that nearly all of us have, biases that causes us, without even realizing it, to see black men as the other - a possible threat. Myers teaches that One way to change those unconscious biases in ourselves is to learn about successful black men - past and present. Look at their faces, learn their stories. Be open to widen your circle of understanding.

In our scripture today Jesus engaged with this outsider, the woman who broke the rules and walked into Jesus' private space. He stayed in the discomfort as she challenged him to widen his table.

Include all of us, she said. You, Jesus, you have enough to feed us all.

My friends -

"Be opened" *Ephphatha*, (F - fa -tha) be open to the Good News that stretches your capacity to love. Be opened. The table of Jesus' love and grace is wide. There's space for all.

end with this song... "Draw the Circle Wide"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mj2eup68esU>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7pzUyGEDs0s>

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<https://e.ted.com/explore.ted.com/watch/MYttZ2GIQqeF---1eyJ0cmFja2luZyl6eyJkaWQiOjcwNDg0MTE4MCwicmlkloiTVl0dFoyR0lPcWVGIn0sInByb3RvY29sljoiaHR0cHM6In0-2.i-1OHgIGy-0KtlzkGe5cfpMUHN2KYHqNEqWPiZb2xsh-0c-2>