

Sermon – 5 September 2021  
Carol Rutz  
Mark 7: 24-37

Here's the deal: A while back, I offered Lauren some help during this transition period between Wendy Vander Hart's departure last week and Cindy Maddox' arrival next month. She called my bluff, so here I am, preaching for the first time since our last interim period. With your good will, we'll do fine.

Some of you may remember that our former pastor, Sandy Johnson, would sometimes comment that the Scriptures feature quotes from Jesus that she really wished he hadn't said. Today's passage offers such an unsettling moment, a startling comment from Jesus that is anachronistic in terms of 21<sup>st</sup> century American views on gender equity, racism, and class. Why did he speak to the Syrophenician woman so harshly? Let's try to make sense of it.

Scholars have determined that the book of Mark is the earliest effort to document Jesus' ministry that has made it into the canon. It was probably written before the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, yet at least a generation after Jesus' death. Even in translation, the work shows evidence of haste, of a determination on the part of the writer to set down the teachings, sayings, and miracles that were attributed to Jesus, to get them in writing for the benefit of the infant church.

Many readers comment on the propulsive nature of the prose, with the word "immediately" and transitions such as "and then" sprinkled liberally throughout the 16 chapters. It's a study in efficiency when compared to the other Gospels: no genealogy, no nativity story, no childhood encounters with the Torah and temple elders. Nope, we kick it off with Jesus receiving baptism as an adult from John the Baptist, heading right into the temptation in the desert, on to his preaching, teaching, and healing ministry in Galilee, and, eventually, the journey to Jerusalem. In Jerusalem, his final deeds and his trial, crucifixion, and death, are presented in detail, with a brief note about the resurrection.

I read this shortest Gospel straight through recently, and I recommend it to you for a whirlwind take on Jesus' ministry. Basically, the book of Mark is a collection of chase scenes. In those 16 chapters, the writer has to record the teaching, miracles, and other activities that earned Jesus praise among his followers. Those same activities confronted and threatened both religious and secular authorities—enough to justify his execution by the Roman occupying government.

Today's text, from chapter 7, begins with Jesus entering the city of Tyre, trying to lie low and "escape notice." It doesn't work, because a Syrophenician woman finds him, bows before him, and asks him to heal her daughter of an unclean spirit or demon. In response, Jesus rebukes her in language that makes us squirm, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

The petitioner is not only female, she is also a Gentile, and apparently of a lower class than Jesus and his unnamed host. She is also persistent, answering, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” She dares to push against his racism, sexism, and classism, and it works, because Jesus replies, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.” When she returns home, the demon is indeed gone.

From our perspective, the “demon” probably represents the first century understanding of mental illness—schizophrenia, Tourette’s syndrome, or perhaps something physical, such as a seizure disorder. Regardless, Jesus is able to mitigate the problem, whatever clinical term we might apply today, and to do so telekinetically. He doesn’t even see the child he heals. Sounds pretty cool to me, and I can well understand how Jesus’ contemporaries would be impressed by his compassion and the resulting miracle.

After this encounter and successful healing, Jesus moves on toward the Sea of Galilee, where people bring him a man who is deaf and has a speech impediment. This time, Jesus actively, compassionately lays on hands, probing the man’s ears and tongue, and commands, “Ephphatha!” Be opened!

A small aside: Those who are familiar with some of Faribault’s educational amenities will remember that the state academies for deaf and blind students are located there. For many years, a congregation of deaf people worshipped at a church named Ephphatha after this very passage. As the deaf community declined and could no longer support a pastor qualified to lead them, local churches picked up the practice of offering American Sign Language interpretation to serve those who no longer had that church of their own. Our children grew up in Faribault, and they were socialized early into the ASL basics as well as learning to offer respectful assistance to visually impaired people. My older son participated in a track team that included deaf students. Team members and we fans learned how to cheer and applaud for deaf athletes – demo – an inclusive practice that works beautifully on Zoom.

Back to the second miracle in today’s passage. Thanks to Jesus’ intervention, the man is able to hear and to speak plainly, which causes a great deal of excitement that Jesus tries to discourage. Nevertheless, he is hailed as one who makes the deaf hear and the dumb to speak. Again, pretty cool.

To summarize, these two stories feature compassionate intervention into physical or emotional problems that can engender fearful misunderstanding—disabilities and mental health issues—and they also touch on social justice issues of race, gender, and class.

To a considerable extent, the culture in a wealthy country like ours has found ways to regularize miracles pertaining to medical and emotional conditions. Professional physicians, audiologists, and speech therapists, some of whom are in this room, are trained to address psychiatric, physical, and neurological problems as well as disabilities, whether through medical procedures, individual therapy, or the use of appliances. As a hearing impaired person myself, I am equally frustrated by my hearing loss and grateful that I have access to audiologists and

equipment that mostly normalize my sensory experience. In my life, hearing aids count as a miracle. The same goes for my trusty bifocals. I am far older than the average adult in first century Palestine, and I am fortunate to have compensatory machinery to keep me pretty much on track.

Obviously, the miracles I experience with hearing and vision are not as widely available as one would hope. There is work to be done worldwide to make diagnosis, treatment, and appropriate technology available to all—and to do so respectfully, interrupting bias or aversion toward those with mental illness and disabilities.

And now we return to the other social justice issues. An equitable dispersal of medical, psychiatric, and technological expertise is possible only with targeted, intentional intervention that breaks through powerful cultural norms. Hesitation to accept the miracle of Covid vaccine in this country is one example of what seems to be cultural suspicion of vaccines in general and the Covid vaccine in particular. How can that suspicion be neutralized?

Another example is the current fear on behalf of Afghan women, which speaks to their cultural history of gender relations that strikes many of us, as Americans with very different experiences and values, as just plain wrong. The conversation the Syrophenician woman had with Jesus may be somewhat like traditional Afghan discourse between men and women. Add in racial and class status, and the picture is bleak.

But the fact is that Afghanistan has no corner on the market for gender, racial, and class discrimination. Sad to say, these social justice problems prosper in Northfield, in Minnesota, in the US. Our church has long been dedicated to social justice, and our local efforts, including our work on land acknowledgement and participation in Isaiah, speak to those values. And we know we cannot rest on our laurels. Our generosity in supporting the ministries of this church has seen us through the pandemic—so far. Recovering our congregant energy toward social justice will happen more naturally as pandemic restrictions decrease and vaccination percentages increase. When we are more comfortable being together, we will be more able to look around us critically and act compassionately on behalf of our better instincts.

There is an old saying that “God has no hands but our hands.” The work awaits, in all of its daunting, necessary dimensions. Today’s text rings the changes on work—Jesus’ miracles—and faith—on the part of those who came forward to ask for help and those who were changed by Jesus’ compassionate, active engagement. Our culture can perform medical miracles. These hands, our collective, compassionate hands, can tackle social justice and produce miracles in that realm as well.

May it be so, Amen.

Our next hymn speaks to the joy of work on this Labor Day weekend.