

September 5th , 2021
Year B; 15th Pentecost
Psalm 146
James 2: 1-10, 14-17
Mark 7: 24-37

Mark 7:24-37

Jesus 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, "Sir, 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 he 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. 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. 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."

"In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

Our passage today from Mark is often avoided by preachers, and so I'm not surprised to find it on the Sunday of Labor Day weekend, an often low Sunday, and if there is an associate minister, that unfortunate person gets to preach, while the rector goes to the beach!

This passage is avoided by preachers because it is a rare instance of Jesus sounding, well, really awful.

Jesus is traveling from place to place in these chapters from the gospel of Mark. And today we find him in the region of Tyre, a Gentile region, not an area where Jews lived.

Jesus sounds tired to me in the opening of this passage:

“He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice.....”

Perhaps Jesus went to a Gentile region to have a bit of quiet, not so hounded by his fellow Jews, as he was last week with the Pharisees, coming to challenge and argue with him. We can only guess....

But despite being in an area where he was less known, a woman hears he is there, barges in, and insists on being heard. Her little daughter is in desperate need.

Tim and I did a funeral yesterday, and a great granddaughter of the deceased was there, 3 years old, charming and filled with life, chatting with everyone, dancing, so beautiful. Picture in your mind someone who matches that simple description, her little daughter.

And that little daughter is in serious danger, with an unclean spirit, to us an unknown, mysterious and heart wrenching illness, and her mother will do anything to help her, and seeks out the tired, and yes, human preacher named Jesus.

As you may remember from a few weeks ago, when we were focused on the gospel of John, that John is the gospel where Jesus is the most godly, all seeing, knowing the future.

In contrast Mark, the first gospel written, often shows Jesus as the most human, most often allowing us to see him tired, hungry, discouraged, and today humanly, recognizable to all of us, as exhausted, burned out.

This person that approaches Jesus for help, not in public, but entering a house without an invitation, is a Syrophenician, a Gentile and a woman. In that society, she had NO right to engage Jesus in conversation in a public place, much less barging into a home uninvited.

But still, she enters the house, and humbles herself at the feet of Jesus, begging for help for her little daughter.
And the Jesus we know and who responds with compassion is gone.

Jesus responds by saying:

“Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

This response is shocking; Jesus not only rejects the woman, but he refers to her as a dog.

He uses the Greek word “kynarion” which means dog, but also was known as an ethnic slur in the ancient Middle East, a slur used by Jews to refer to non-Jews.

The Jews are the children, and the non-Jews are the dogs.

But the woman is not deterred by these insulting words from Jesus, and she has a fast and persuasive reply for Jesus, saying:

“Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”

Rather than being hurt by his words, the woman uses them to argue with him:

If I’m a dog, treat me as a dog, and throw me some crumbs of your powers, and heal my child!

The woman’s words, the words of a Gentile woman, change Jesus’s mind, and he heals her daughter.

Some writers and preachers try to soften the way Jesus spoke to this woman or explain it away. But I find I want the words of Jesus to stand, not because they are kind or good, no, they are rude and awful.

But I want them to stand because they show us a time when that human Jesus changed his mind. We need to see Jesus as our model here, as much as we need him to be our model for compassion or mercy.

In our world today changing our minds is a rare public occurrence. In the year 2021 changing your mind is seen as weakness.

And yet, thinking about things deeply is a crucial human skill, one that Jesus models for us today.

We need to see the human and the godly Jesus, and today the human, listens and is moved, and does not hide that change.

One of the magazines I read on theology and the church has a feature I like called: “How My Mind Has Changed”.

The magazine is Christian Century and this periodic feature is introduced with these words:

During times of turbulence in politics, culture, and religious life, it's tempting to hold tightly to current convictions. Allowing a change of one's mind or heart can be difficult work. With this in mind, we have resumed a series published at intervals by Christian Century since 1939, in which we ask leading thinkers to reflect on their own struggles, disappointments, and hopes as they address the topic, “How My Mind Has Changed”.

With this sermon I have pondered times I have changed my mind, and one from last summer kept coming back to me.

After the murder of George Floyd in May of 2020, protests erupted across our country. As you know those protests went on in Richmond for over 100 days and led to the toppling of a few Confederate monuments and the removal of others.

Tim and I lived in Richmond for over 25 years, and Monument Avenue was very familiar to us. We participated in a couple of the Monument Avenue 10K

aces while we lived there, the regal houses and the monuments and flowering trees making a delightful background for the races.

Whenever out-of-town guests came to visit us, an evening drive down Monument Avenue was always on our agenda, as the Monuments were lit at night and dramatic to view.

Now do understand, Tim and I are not supporters of the Confederacy, and do not revere those men on the monuments, but they seemed to us like harmless features of the city and a permanent part of the fabric of the city.

Until the protests last summer. Among all the articles in the Richmond Times Dispatch, and especially the ones from Pulitzer Prize winning journalist, Michael Paul Williams, people for the first time began to say publicly how they saw the statues, how they affected them.

I remember in particular, a black woman telling of how she instructed her children to act as they walked by the statues, telling them to keep their eyes down and to walk briskly, never looking up, neither revering the statues nor being intimidated by them.

The pain in the voices of so many black people interviewed last summer about the influence of the statues on them and their life in Richmond stunned me and humbled me.

I, as a white woman, had never seen those silly statues, those tourist attractions, that way.

I had never gotten into the shoes of a black person to understand how the statues continued to do the work they were constructed to do, built in the years of the Jim Crow laws, to intimate black folks and remind them of the towering influence of the Confederacy still in their lives.

Last summer I changed my mind about the statues on Monument Avenue, and for the first time I deeply understood the corrosive harm they caused and the urgent need to have them removed.

Finally, you may have notice that our reading today actually contains two healing stories.

After Jesus heals the little daughter of the Syrophenician woman, he travels on and heals a man who is deaf, unable to hear and to speak.

Jesus touches the man's ears and tongue and then looks up to heaven and says: "Be opened." And the man is healed, he is opened and can hear and speak.

May these two stories today help us to join our savior and brother Jesus in noticing where we need to be opened, where we are deaf, and in need of healing.

And may Jesus's path to changing his mind help us to find the courage to be opened too.

Amen.