

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 Syrophoenician 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."

Breaking Boundaries in Tyre and Sidon

For some reason I have come to better appreciate the healing miracles of Jesus in recent years. I have to come to view him more as a healer, more as the Good Physician, than in other parts of my life. But, having said that, the first thing I thought when I heard this second healing miracle in the Gospel today -- the healing of the man unable to hear or to speak -- was COVID PROTOCOLS! Somebody needs to tell Jesus that we have COVID protocols, buddy! That's way too much contact. First Jesus puts his fingers in his ears. I'm just going to say it: Wet willies are not allowed during a pandemic! And then Jesus spits on his fingers and touches this poor guy's tongue! You know they weren't properly distanced or wearing masks! Come on Jesus! Get with the program here!

These are both powerful stories of healing and hope. This story of healing the man unable to hear or to speak properly forms in us a prayer: “Lord, open our ears. Release our tongues so that all we can do is zealously proclaim the one who has done everything well -- the incarnate Son of God.”

Honestly, that would be Gospel enough for us this morning but I also noticed in this passage the context of these miracles. Not exactly the literary context so much but more the historical and cultural context, and especially the geographical context. In other words, in researching for today I had to flip to the back of my study Bible. You know what is often in the back of a study Bible? Maps! I found myself looking at a map of the Palestine in the Roman Era because the text says in opening this morning that Jesus *set out*. This is not an ordinary trip to the grocery store. It says he *set out and went away*. Jesus is going on a trip. He’s leaving God’s country behind and headed North!

In Mark chapter 6, the chapter before our reading today, it begins by saying that Jesus is in his home town -- in Nazareth -- where he receives a mixed reception. “He thinks he’s real smart, doesn’t he?” people said. A prophet is not without honor except in his own town. So Jesus moves on and visits the nearby villages to teach and to preach. He calls disciples from little enclaves on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. In chapter 6, we hear about him walking on water on the way to Bethsaida, on the northern part of Galilee and healing people in Gennesaret, not too far away.

But then he heads north. He “set out and went away” to the region of Tyre. That’s pretty far to walk and it’s not on some pond -- it’s not the Galilean Lake -- but now he’s on the Mediterranean Sea. And then Sidon is even farther north. I had to figure out the geography on this one. In my study Bible, on these maps, there’s always the legend. There’s a key that explains the different dots and markings on the map and it has on it a scale. On this one, it says every inch is about a 20 miles. So I begin to measure. From Jerusalem and Bethany, that’s down south on the map, it’s 20, 40, 60... it’s about 100 miles to Tyre. And about another 20 miles up to Sidon. Even from Nazareth, which is closer, it’s about a forty or fifty mile walk.

Now this summer, we went up to New Hampshire and Vermont and we noticed pretty quickly that the people up there are a little bit different. They look different and they speak different. Like a different tribe or something. The words in our text make it clear that Jesus has left the South. He has left God’s country and he’s traveling near the Decapolis. That sounds like Greek to me. And Tyre and Sidon, those aren’t towns down here. It doesn’t say he went to Asheville or even to Raleigh. No, Jesus went way up the coast. We are talking Delaware or New Jersey now. Today, Sidon is in Lebanon; its third largest city. And even then, these were major seaports. They were on the ocean.

Our story begins by saying that even up there people had heard of him. He entered a house and wanted to get away from the crowds but he could not escape notice. A woman comes to him, whose little daughter is not well. She is sick or possessed or something. She is not well. And this woman bows down at the feet of this Jesus and begs him to help her daughter. Then the text reminds us of where he is by saying that this woman was a Gentile. She was not a Jew. She was no descendant of Abraham but of Syrophoenician origin. It's the Bible's way of making sure that you and I know that Jesus is now in unclean territory. If you are a Jew in that time then you don't hang out with Gentiles because they don't look the same, they don't talk the same, they worship false gods, and they're unclean. And, not to mention, there's a lot of history between these folks and the tribes of Judah and Israel. I'm not talking about rival football teams. This isn't Alabama vs. Auburn. It's not Clemson vs. South Carolina. These people have fought wars against each other, and you know what, they still are today.

In Matthew's version of this story, it doesn't call the woman Syrophoenician. It just says she's a Canaanite. Her people lived here before David, before Joshua, before Joseph, and before Abraham. We shouldn't be surprised that in Matthew's version of the story, she comes to Jesus, shouting just like in Mark but the Matthean disciples say to Jesus, "Lord, send her away. She keeps shouting at us."

And that is exactly when Jesus gets to work. He is working on this woman, this foreigner, this Yankee, yes. He's going to help her little girl but his disciples have no idea how God draws the lines. And so Jesus toys with his friends when he says, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." The disciples are thinking, "Here we go. He's going to tell her what we think of her and all of these people." But the woman responds, and you know it stopped the disciples in their tracks, it froze them in their xenophobia, it made folly of their stereotypes when she responded, "Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

There were several healings that happened that day. We can trust the woman, this mother, was healed in just talking with Jesus, and we know that her daughter was made well because she went home and found her lying in bed, in her right mind for the demon had left her. But also, the disciples of Jesus were taken on a healing journey when they *set out and went away*. They left the people they knew, the paths they had traveled before, and they left behind the lines on the map that separated them one country from another. God broke through the walls that our world had built in their hearts when Christ took the Gospel to a foreign land. Little did those disciples know that the last commandment Jesus would give them -- some call it a Great Commission -- would be to go and make disciples of all nations so that everyone knows that God loves them, too.

The boundary can exist on a map. The boundary can exist on a cable news program. It can exist in your own home, in your family. Jesus came down to break down the boundaries that exist

within us and around us, boundaries that separate the rich from the poor, the strong from the weak, the young from the old, the loved from the unloved. Jesus came to break down the boundaries that exist between us and God, between us and our neighbors, between us and our enemies. And we all know that the biggest, the tallest, and the strongest walls ever built have been constructed within the human heart. Jesus came to break down those boundaries, too.