

Sermons at  
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)  
Reggie Denton, Pastor

September 8, 2024 (Proper 18, Year B)  
Mark 7:24-37

“Let the CHILDREN be fed FIRST, for it is not fair to take the CHILDREN’S food and throw it to the DOGS.”

Okay, let’s be frank: that was just MEAN. Every time we hear this story we do a double take. “Did JESUS really SAY that?!” I mean, it seems so out of CHARACTER for Jesus.

Let’s back up and set the scene here. Jesus has been HAVING one run in after another with the religious authorities in Galilee, heated discussion after heated discussion, and he KNOWS that they’re already PLOTTING to KILL him. The beginning of our story says that Jesus “set out and went away to the region of Tyre.” Now, Tyre was a pretty good distance away, further NORTH than he had EVER traveled in his ministry.

After this story, it says that he traveled by way of Sidon to the region of the Decapolis. Now, that’s an ODD CHOICE. Sidon was FURTHER north yet, and the Decapolis was a good distance SOUTH. It was like traveling from Minneapolis to Rochester by way of DULUTH. Why would he DO that? Well, by taking that VERY LONG WAY, he went AROUND GALILEE.

Jesus was tired. He was trying to get away for a bit, away from all the arguing; he was worn out. He went to an area where he thought people WOULDN’T RECOGNIZE him. It says, “he entered a house and did not want ANYONE to KNOW he was THERE.”

But his plan doesn’t work. Jesus is approached by a woman. Now, in those days, women didn’t speak to men in public at ALL, so this ALONE tells you how DETERMINED this woman is. But it’s not just ANY woman, it’s a GENTILE woman, a SYROPHOENICIAN woman, to be exact, a FOREIGNER, and even an ENEMY. Which is Mark’s way of telling us that she’s about as FAR AWAY from Jesus socially as possible.

Her daughter is sick, and she BEGS Jesus to do for her little girl what he’d done for so many others. But Jesus’ response is DISTURBING. Jesus REFUSES. More than that, he INSULTS her. More than THAT, given that she’s BEGGING on her KNEES, Jesus HUMILIATES her, comparing her to a DOG.

Why on EARTH would Jesus react to someone in need in such a CALLOUS manner?

Philip Yancey says that we often have an image of Jesus that comes straight out of Hollywood films. We picture Jesus reciting his lines evenly and perfectly rehearsed. We see him striding authoritatively through the bustling crowds. He already knows what to say in every situation, and says it in measured tones, with all the appropriately meaningful looks. Yancey calls this image “The Prozac Jesus”.

But our Gospels tell a different story, and this exchange is one of those times we see the REAL, HUMAN Jesus. The Jesus we read about in the Gospels was fiery and compelling. People crowded around him, put up with discomfort and hunger, just to GET to hear a LITTLE of what he had to say. He cried. He was moved by pity. He was frustrated with his disciples, angry with coldhearted legalists, grief-stricken at Calvary, and YES, at times, even UNSURE about his purpose on earth. This is what we mean when we say that Jesus was FULLY HUMAN.

Jesus was TIRED, and when WE HUMANS get tired, we are NOT the BEST VERSION of ourselves.

Let me ask YOU, was there ever a time, when YOU were TIRED, when you said something a little TOO HARSH to a family member, or your spouse, or even one of your KIDS? This is part of being human. When we’re EXHAUSTED, we pull INTO OURSELVES, and we start to think ONLY about what WE want, and what WE need, and we get SELFISH. And we want to be LEFT ALONE.

For the HUMAN SIDE of Jesus, it was ALL TOO EASY to fall BACK into the type of thinking he GREW UP with in his hometown – the false dichotomies of in and out, saved and damned, worthy and unworthy, Jew and Gentile.

And Jesus didn't even BELIEVE what he was saying. We KNOW that, because he'd already INTENTIONALLY GONE to gentile TOWNS. He'd already proclaimed his GOSPEL to gentile believers. He'd already healed and fed gentile followers. He'd already made SOME gentiles to be DISCIPLES, like the woman at the well, and the man from whom he'd cast out a LEGION of demons. He KNEW his message was for the saving of the WORLD, but in this moment of WEAKNESS, he FORGOT who he WAS.

But this WOMAN is FIERCE, the way ONLY the MOTHER of a sick child can be. She won't BE brushed off or cast aside. She won't be STOPPED. We can almost HEAR her say, "FINE! Because I love my DAUGHTER so much, I'll TAKE your insult. KEEP your bread, but at LEAST give us the CRUMBS off the TABLE."

And she CHANGES Jesus' MIND! He responds to her TENACIOUS, DESPERATE faith by COMMENDING her, and HEALING her beloved daughter.

You see, sometimes, IN our HUMANNESS, in ORDER to know the TRUTH, we need to be CONFRONTED by it. This woman WOKE JESUS UP, and reminded him WHO HE WAS. She reminded him that God's kingdom includes ALL people – Jews AND Gentiles – ALL people. She SHOWED Jesus, and WE THE CHURCH, that God's love and grace is for EVERYONE, NO EXCEPTIONS. The EXPANSIVENESS of God's LOVE, God's HEALING, God's GRACE will NOT be LIMITED by any LOCATION or LAWS. It will not be diminished by any creed or decree. It will not be regulated by the reasons WE come up with for WHY God COULDN'T love THOSE people. God's kingdom is so HUGE, so VAST, so UNEXPECTEDLY GRACIOUS and WILDLY INCLUSIVE that it even took JESUS a little while to FULLY GRASP it. She RE-OPENED Jesus' eyes to SEE that God's love is bigger and greater and deeper and wider than even HE had imagined. Even JESUS was surprised by just how AMAZING God's grace is.

And the SURPRISING thing is that, in THIS story, the good news comes from someone OTHER than Jesus: a woman, an UNNAMED woman, who in THAT time and place, DIDN'T have ANY rights. It comes from an outsider, a foreigner, a Gentile, who was NOT included in the promise of Abraham. It comes from the mother of a sick child. But she had heard the good news preached to OTHERS, and had the AUDACITY to believe it was ALSO for HER and her DAUGHTER. She DARED to believe that the kingdom of God was for EVERYONE.

This is why we're HERE today. LIKE that woman who brought her daughter to Jesus, and LIKE the friends in our SECOND story, who brought their friend to Jesus for healing, today we bring OUR children to Jesus. Because we DARE to believe that Jesus is for THEM TOO.

I heard about a Christian recording artist who talked about the most important influences in his life. He knows and has worked with all the most prominent Christian preachers, lecturers, authors and performers in the nation. But he said, above and beyond them all, the SINGLE MOST profound influence in his life (in fact, he said, the single force that won him to Christ) was his MOTHER. He confessed that he hadn't been an easy child to raise. If there was trouble to be found, he was usually the one to find it. But every night his mother would come into his room, kneel beside his bed, and talk to Jesus about her son. He would listen in as she said: "Jesus, he's a good boy. He just doesn't know it yet. Give me the patience to be his mother. Let me be slow to anger and quick to forgive. And let me LOVE him the way YOU do."

The singer said: "I play concerts before huge audiences. I'm heard on radio stations around the world. But somehow, I think the most IMPORTANT witness I MAKE is every night when I kneel and pray beside MY little boy's bed, like MY Mama did next to MINE."

We never know the incredible influence we can have on the world by simply SHARING our FAITH, sharing the GOSPEL, with our CHILDREN. The most effective way of communicating isn't through what we say, but through what we DO, and what we ARE.

And THAT is why we DO things like Sunday School and Wednesday Night Faith and the Promise Milestones for our children, and Affirmation and Youth programming. That's why we have MENTORING – for our adults to SHARE their story with the kids. That's why we have men's and women's Bible studies at this church – so God can TEACH us, and show us how WIDE God's love is, and how FAR God's love goes.

Through his Word, God opens OUR ears to HEAR the stories, and loosens our TONGUES to TELL the stories.

So, AS we begin another year, JESUS says, "EPHPHATHA...Be opened!"

All right then, let's do this. In Jesus name, I declare this school year OPENED. Amen.