

The Road to Ephatha

A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
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Mark 7:24-37

As I looked at the assigned texts for today from the Revised Common Lectionary—and for those who don't know, the lectionary is a three year cycle of readings established for each Sunday and the other special days of worship—a cycle that includes an OT lesson, a psalm, a reading from a NT letter, and a Gospel passage that is shared by the major mainline Protestant churches and Roman Catholics—I found myself drawn to the Gospel lesson from Mark. It's two brief episodes in Jesus ministry, really—and Mark places them directly after Jesus teaching the disciples that it is not the food that goes into a person's mouth that causes them to be ritually clean or unclean, but it is the thoughts, words, and deeds that come out of a person's heart that make them ritually unacceptable. It is right after Jesus says this that our reading for today begins. Notice how Jesus' own words seem to “go to work” on him here

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 Syro-Phoenician 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.'*

I don't remember exactly when my mother gave me the desk plate sign that I held on to for many years, but I'm sure it was some time after I preached my first sermon. The yellow plastic desk plate reads, “Take my advice. I'm not using it.” It's not the kind of thing that you'd proudly display in an office, but I kept it around tucked in a drawer to keep me grounded and though it's long gone now, its message has kept me regularly reflecting on whether the words I say from the pulpit and elsewhere match the life I lead. A desk plate like that will keep you humble.

That old desk plate came to mind as I studied the Gospel of Mark's account of Jesus' encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman who won't let him ignore her pain and need, regardless of the fact that she is not Jewish, and how that encounter leads to Jesus' subsequent healing of the man who couldn't hear and could not speak. The desk plate sign came to mind because I think these two passages give us a glimpse into how Jesus learns to take his own advice.

They show us how he lives into the words that he says, words about what is important about a person being not what is on the outside--not what goes into their mouth, no what they eat, or drink,

not how they look, not their ethnicity or nationality or religious background, none of the outer things matter Jesus has just told his disciples—but it is what comes from within, from the heart, and is expressed in one's words and deeds that matters, that makes a person clean or unclean, acceptable or unacceptable.

The Gospel of Mark has Jesus learn his own lesson in an encounter with a real flesh and blood human being.

I think the Gospel of Mark sets that up very intentionally. As opposed to the Gospel of Luke, which is written by a Gentile Christian to tell the story of Jesus to predominantly Gentile Christians, Mark relates his version of the story of Jesus' life to a group of predominantly Jewish Christians, a group that probably had its share of struggles accepting those who had not grown up in their Jewish faith into this new Way that Jesus had inaugurated. Jesus, after all, was Jewish—we need to never forget that. His first and most of his earliest followers were Jewish, too.

It was only sometime after Pentecost, and after Peter's vision on the rooftop at Joppa and Paul's persistent outreach to the Gentile community, that Jesus' message started to really take hold in the non-Jewish world. That caused some tension between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. That tension around openness to Gentiles nearly fractured the early church. The Gospels—all four of them—were written in the midst of that struggle.

Luke, the gospel to the Gentiles, has Jesus' launch his ministry with a sermon in his home town of Nazareth where he angers the people of his village by referring to two illustrations from Hebrew scripture.

Jesus says to them: there were many widows in Israel during the time of the prophet Elijah, but he went only to the widow of Zarephath (whose son he brought back to life). And there were many lepers in Israel during the time of the prophet Elisha, but he went only to the leper Naaman the King of Syria (whom he healed). Oh, Luke says, the people of Nazareth most definitely did not want to hear that, and they tried to drive Jesus out of the village.

Now you can get away with starting your story of Jesus ministry that way if you're Luke writing to a bunch of non-Jewish believers. But not if you're Mark. If you're Mark, you have to introduce the idea of openness and inclusion more gradually. What's the best way to do that?

You let them see Jesus' learning the message first, and gradually. Learning in public, as it were. Being teachable. Having a humbling, *"Take My Advice, I'm Not Using It"* moment.

Sure, you can talk a good game about openness, and welcoming and receiving people who aren't like you, but what happens when that person is more than a theoretical idea, but a real flesh and blood human in front of you? What happens when everything in your culture of origin tells you that this person is to be regarded as somehow less human, less worthy of love, less worthy of respect than you are? What do you do then?

I think that's why Mark (and Matthew, too) puts this story in his Gospel. To make the point that it is difficult for an insider to welcome someone whom they've been taught is unacceptable, somehow outside of their acceptable circles. Even Jesus had to learn that, Mark says.

And Luke? Well, not surprisingly Luke leaves this story out altogether. A story where Jesus tells a Gentile that it's not fair to take the children's food and give it to the dogs is too embarrassing to

share when you're trying to reach non-Jewish believers. It's just not going to score any points with them.

But Mark has a different project. Mark needs his community of insiders to learn to do the difficult work of accepting the outsiders in. In order to do that, they had to learn something new. While people may not be born instinctively regarding other people and groups as less than, cultures have over the millennia ingrained that message. It certainly happens in the culture that we grew up in. If you deny that, you are kidding yourself.

The song Lieutenant Cable sings in the musical *South Pacific* is right on the money:

*You've got to be taught
To hate and fear,
You've got to be taught
From year to year,
It's got to be drummed
In your dear little ear
You've got to be carefully taught.
You've got to be taught to be afraid
Of people whose eyes are oddly made,
And people whose skin is a diff'rent shade,
You've got to be carefully taught.
You've got to be taught before it's too late,
Before you are six or seven or eight,
To hate all the people your relatives hate,
You've got to be carefully taught!*

Mark's community had been carefully taught, so there was much they needed to unlearn. And frankly, whether the teaching has been explicit or implicit, many of us, I daresay all of us, have been carefully, subtly, insidiously taught, too. Just as Mark's community had been.

So Mark shows them Jesus' encountering a Gentile woman—of Syro-Phoenician origin—and seeing in her, through her persistent iteration of her need, through her not taking his dehumanizing **no** for an answer, through her care and concern for her own child in pain, Mark has Jesus see a real live flesh and blood Gentile, who is a human being just like him. I'll tell you what—a real live flesh and blood human being beats a theoretical human being any day. Because a real live outsider, a real live person who has been denied space at the table, well, they are real. And they are alive. So Jesus sees this real live Syro-phoenician woman and he heals her daughter.

And then Mark takes Jesus on a journey. The Gospel says, "*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.*" Now if you're wondering why there is a map on the front of your bulletin today, this is it. Pull out your bulletin. I want you to find Tyre on the map. It's a little more than $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way up the map, on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Now find the Sea of Galilee. It's tiny on that map. It is southeast of there, about an inch and a half southeast, at about 5 o'clock. Have you found it? Now find Sidon. It is north of Tyre on the Mediterranean Coast, about an inch—which is twenty miles. If you're going towards the Sea of Galilee from Tyre, that's not the direction you go. You don't head twenty miles north up the coast of the Mediterranean, you go southeast. But Jesus goes by way of Tyre.

Why? Commenters have said over the centuries that he wanted to avoid the direct route to Galilee because of all the attention he was getting there. There were people there who had seen him feed the five thousand and they might want to seize him and make him king. On the other hand, Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee, had already gotten wind of him and was out to arrest him. That may have been part of the reason, to avoid attention from those two groups, say scholars that he headed north to go south. Or it could be that Jesus just needed to rest and recharge his batteries in a place where not everyone knew him before he went back towards Galilee.

But I think Mark's gospel takes him north to go south for an additional reason. I think Mark knows that sometimes it takes time for a lesson to sink in, so he throws in a subtle reminder to his first century Jewish audience. Because when Jesus goes up to Sidon, he has to go through a little town called, in Jesus' day, Sarepta. But in the time of Elijah, it was known as Zarephath.

Mark's first hearers, whose minds weren't preoccupied with sports statistics, and op-eds, and BuzzFeed quizzes, would have known their Hebrew scriptures. They would have intuitively made the connection to that Gentile woman whose son Elijah healed. Maybe Jesus himself was subconsciously drawn there to process what had happened between him and the Syrophenician woman. To remember that God really did care about the needs of the outsider, and always had, and that he was sent to the Gentiles as well as the Jews.

So when, in the very next episode, people bring Jesus a deaf and dumb man in Gentile territory, Jesus knows what to do. He looks up to heaven and he sighs, as if to say, "I get it. Okay, okay, I get it, I get it" and then he says, "*Ephathah*."

Now, if you're looking for *Ephathah* on the map, you're not going to find it. Unlike Tyre, and Sidon, and Zarephath and Syria and Galilee and McLean and Arlington and Washington, D.C., *Ephatha* is not a place. Ephratha is, but not Ephatha.

Ephatha is not a place, it's a stance towards life. It's a way of living. It's an approach towards people who are different than you are and circumstances that are uncomfortable for you. Mark tells us what the word, *Ephatha* means. When Jesus spits on the man's tongue and puts his fingers in the man's ears, Jesus says, "*Ephatha*" and Mark goes on to say that means "Be Opened."

Ears be opened. Mouth be opened. Jesus says this not just to the man, but to himself, to Mark's community, and to us. *Ephatha*.

The road to *Ephatha*, which is not a place but a way of being, is a journey that involves setting aside long held prejudices, and preconceived notions, and looking beyond what divides us from others towards what unites us with them. It requires taking a look at how we benefit from privilege and really seeing people as the human beings they are. It requires putting ourselves in other people's shoes and trying to imagine what it might be like to be in their skin. It requires being open to experiences, having a sense that more will be revealed, and having a teachable heart and spirit.

And I think Mark puts his two stories together the way he does to show us that open eyes that are open and hearts that are open are not enough. When we see another's humanity, the next step is to have our ears unstopped so that we can hear their cries of pain. The final step is to have our tongues unloosed, set free, so that we can speak up on their behalf.

A couple of final comments.

1. Being open means being teachable, which goes beyond just being teachable about openness to others. It means being willing to learn from all the experiences life sends us. We might try to begin each new day with this prayer: *O God, What new thing, what new lesson are you going to show me today? How can I learn from this? Ephatha!*

2. In that regard, I am grateful, like my predecessor John Sonnenday was, for the opportunity to learn in public with you. Working with texts of scripture, grappling with what it means to follow Jesus, getting new insights into myself and into human nature, I find myself learning every day in this community. You all teach me. You learn along with me.

One of the things I have learned over the years, is that is important to speak up and not be quiet. Because in times of injustice, to stay silent is in fact to take a side.

3. Now I want to close with a story. It's a story that doesn't make me very comfortable. Relax, it's not about me. It still doesn't make me comfortable.

The other day, my younger daughter Martha, who has arrived in Los Angeles for her placement through Presbyterian Young Adult Volunteers, well she met with the other people in her house and the site coordinator and they talked about their work assignments for the year. From the beginning of Martha being sent out to LA to work in the YAV Program, Martha had her eye on what she wanted to do. She wanted to be assigned to the program where she would teach creative writing to teenagers in a homeless shelter. That is her gift area. It's a perfect fit.

Tyrone, the Young Adult Coordinator, gathered everyone together and said, "It is time now to make our assignments. You've all listed one through four your choices." As he listed those choices one person received their first choice, one person received his second choice, and Martha, she was given her fourth choice. The one she least wanted to do. Martha hates to drive. It was a position that required her to drive all over Los Angeles. She was enraged. I don't blame her.

I think Tyrone was messing with them. They complained, as you'd expect, especially given that everyone had picked a different first choice and it would have been easy enough to assign them there.

Again, I'm not in favor of the manipulation Tyrone engaged in, but four hours later, after tears and frustration and everything else, Tyrone came back to them and said, "Okay, you all get your first choice."

So Martha is working where he gifts and passions lie, the placement where she wanted to be assigned.

Then Tyrone, that African-American man, said to them, "Do you see what that feels like, to not get your first choice? Isn't anyone going to tell me that you're grateful that I changed things around? That you got what you wanted?"

Judith and I, after we wrestled with our sense that Tyrone jerked them around a little bit, have decided that maybe he was trying to teach those young people something. Something about what it might be like to live in a different color skin, to not get your first choice through no fault of your own.

Those who have ears to hear, let them hear. And this time, I hope I don't have to say, "Take my advice, I'm not using it." In Jesus' name. Amen.

Hammerstein, Oscar, and Joshua Logan. *South Pacific: A Musical Play*. New York: Random House, 1949. Print.