

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 09/05/2021



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Revised Common Lectionary Year B

Sunday, September 5th

Mark 7:24-37

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The ears of the spiritually deaf be opened!

In last week's lectionary, Jesus eliminated the distinction between clean and unclean foods. This week, Jesus eliminates the distinction between clean and unclean people. This occurs against the unfolding drama of discipleship as two Gentiles are healed because of faith. If the Jews would not believe, the Gentiles would. As Jesus commands a deaf man's ears to "be opened" and his tongue to be released, what are we failing to hear or refusing to speak about in our time?

Mark 7:24-37 Commentary

The issue of what makes a person unclean was addressed in the lectionary last week (Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23). In the controversy between Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees, the religious elites had elevated traditions such as handwashing above the Word of God. They had thus missed the idea that cleanliness is not the result of a ritual but a matter of a clean heart, something only possible through God's grace. In v.19, which was omitted from the lectionary reading, Jesus declared all foods to be clean. Immediately following this confrontation, Jesus went away from the area of Gennesaret on the shore of the Sea of Galilee (6:53) and traveled to a Gentile region.

²⁴ And from there he arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And he entered a house and did not want anyone to know, yet he could not be hidden.

Tyre and Sidon are Gentile areas. No reason is given for this journey. Some argue it was to avoid further conflict with the Jewish authorities until the appropriate time. Others suggest it was a time for solitude, rest, and preparation since Jesus wanted His presence in these areas to be kept a secret. People from Tyre and Sidon had already followed Jesus (3:8) and despite Jesus wishes, His presence could not be hidden. There is some context to the location of this passage in the Phoenician cities of Tyre and Sidon. The region in which these cities were located had a long history of paganism and opposition to the Jews. For instance, the wicked queen Jezebel, who incited Ahab to worship the false god Baal and persecuted Elijah the prophet, was the daughter of the Sidonian king (1 Kings 16:31-32). These cities were part of Syria but were originally intended to be part of Israel. Under the rule of Joshua, the region that included Tyre and Sidon was apportioned to the tribe of Asher (Joshua 19:28-29), but they were never able to enter this region and subdue it. Jesus, the true Israel, now claims this land.

²⁵ But immediately a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit heard of him and came and fell down at his feet. ²⁶ Now the woman was a Gentile, a Syrophenician by birth. And she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.

Mark continues to create the sense of suspense and anticipation as he does throughout his Gospel with the use of *euthys* - "*immediately.*" This encounter with the Syrophoenician woman is profound on many levels. Ethnic, religious, and social taboos are completely thrown out. An unaccompanied Gentile woman addresses a Jewish Rabbi in public and throws herself at His feet. An important detail is the woman had heard of Jesus (see 3:8 as a possibility).

27 And he said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."

Jesus' response surprises many. Jews would routinely refer to Gentiles as dogs as an expression of their contempt. Dogs were scavengers and unclean animals. Yet Jesus had just eliminated the distinction between clean and unclean foods. Presumably the same stood for animals. In any case, the word used for dog, *kynarion*, refers to domesticated dogs and thus it softens the insult. Perhaps it is not an insult but a common expression to help the woman understand He was sent to the Jews first. After all, Jesus is doing the will of the Father. Regardless, Jesus did not immediately agree to help the woman. Was He testing her faith?

28 But she answered him, "Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." 29 And he said to her, "For this statement you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter." 30 And she went home and found the child lying in bed and the demon gone.

The woman gave no ground in her response, yet she did not demand anything, nor did she contest her status as a dog. The Jews – the children – were presented with the Kingdom first, then afterwards, the dogs – the Gentiles hear of it next. Keeping with the same imagery, the woman demanded the crumbs. It was her humbleness, persistency, and courage that prompted Jesus to say, "*For this statement you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter.*"

31 Then he returned from the region of Tyre and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. 32 And they brought to him a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment, and they begged him to lay his hand on him.

Jesus now returns for Tyre and goes through Sidon to the Decapolis region around the Sea of Galilee. This is also Gentile territory. Unlike the woman who begged Jesus to save her daughter, on this occasion it is those who bring the deaf man with a speech impediment who beg Jesus to lay his hand on him. The faith implied in this statement is that Jesus laying hands on the man would heal him.

33 And taking him aside from the crowd privately, he put his fingers into his ears, and after spitting touched his tongue. 34 And looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." 35 And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.

Whereas the woman's daughter was healed from a distance, Jesus' healing of the man was more involved and the report captures the actual words in Aramaic that Jesus used. Like the healing of the woman's daughter, it was also done in private.

36 And Jesus charged them to tell no one. But the more he charged them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. 37 And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, "He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak."

Jesus charges the crowds to tell no one of the healing – a common theme in Mark's Gospel. Despite Jesus' best efforts, the crowds are astonished beyond measure and cannot control themselves. They zealously proclaim the miracle of healing they had witnessed and what they thought this event symbolized.

Reflections

The future of early Christianity is on display in the text. Jesus is the promised Messiah to the Jews. The Jews reject Jesus. This creates an opportunity for the Gentiles. God's promises to Israel were kept but the Bread of Heaven was rejected. This order of Jews first was emphasized to the Syrophenician woman who was more than happy to accept the crumbs.

These pericopes also contribute to the unfolding drama of discipleship running through Mark's Gospel. Both the bold, courageous, and persistent faith of the woman, who was willing to confront every social taboo that stood in the way of her seeking Jesus' help and the expectant faith of the people who brought the deaf man to Jesus represent the faith expected of Christ's disciples. Christ removed the distinction between clean and unclean and Jew and Gentile. He paid no attention to traditions and social norms that excluded or exploited. Following Jesus requires the same in our day.

Another message to disciples within the text complements the attention in Mark to spiritual blindness – only in this pericope it is spiritual deafness. Jesus' response to those who may be spiritually deaf - "*Ephphatha,*" that is, "*Be opened.*" The Jewish establishment was spiritually deaf and blind to Jesus because they could not see beyond their own tradition. They had built the paradigm over generations that provided them with privilege and status. Perhaps the scribes and Pharisees were no better off or of no better use to the people of Israel than the man who was deaf and had a speech impediment.

There is an inherent challenge in this text to disciples in any time and place: How might we be spiritually deaf? Where might we need to have the bold, courageous, and yet humble faith of the woman and be willing to challenge the taboos in our culture for the sake of the Gospel? Where might we have to loosen our tongues and begin to speak coherently on the issues of our day? How do we embrace the outsider as we as Christians are quickly becoming the outsider in our own culture which itself is becoming more tribal?

