

Proper 18 B 2021a
Mark 7: 24-37

Although Advent and Christmas are months away and it barely feels like Easter is past, I would wager that this is the most prayer-filled time of year: it's the beginning of school, and all the students I know are immersed in the hopes of the coming year. Along with the typical hopes which I remember from my own children, who would ask, "Don't let me get the mean one this year," or after the first day, "Why do I get the one who gives all the homework?", for many it is their first in-person experience in a year-and-a half, and there are the fears that need to be allayed by parents about competencies, learning to play and make friends under constrained conditions. There are those who will argue with me about its sacredness, but I have always thought that many of us who are parents remember having approached this week with a kind of hope laced with argument. I was reminded of it when I saw the line of school buses in the afternoon outside the local elementary the other day and I thought about what the parents praying for. I like to think that at least some of them were having thoughts like, "Please take care of this person who means more to me than I can say, in an environment which scares me, these little creatures of God who are both tougher and more fragile than their teachers will know." Maybe you have had the same experience, with mother or granddad in the nursing home, or in the hospital, "Lord, help this person, whose needs I barely understand, but who you love and have promised to keep as your own."

It is a voice like this that I hear in the petition of the Syrophenecian woman when she approaches Jesus about her own daughter, begging at the feet of one who has become renowned throughout the region for what he is able to do. But she is an outsider with her nose pressed against the glass, a woman and one who shares nothing of the nationality of the one she is petitioning. And she is rebuffed, that it is not fair that what is given to the children should be thrown to the dogs. But her faith is stronger than that, and so is her argument, that "even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." She is someone who knows how the world works, but in the world that Jesus has been dismantling, one based on religious privilege, social and ethnic distinctions mean no more than the willingness to call them for what they are, arbitrary and illegitimate. She is asking this one who calls himself the son of man to remember, to remember the promises of God on behalf of God's people. In the midst of uncertainty and anguish, she is reminding God of the assurance he provides of his ultimate purpose for us; in the process, the daughter and the rest of us are healed, the child from her demon and the rest of us from the idea that we cannot argue with God on behalf of those we love. The miracle becomes not only the healing of the child but how our own arguments are sanctified.

My own grandmother was one who understood the deep holiness of her disputes with God. She came to this country as a young woman from Lithuania, without a word of English, and raised six daughters through the Depression. She also had her nose pressed against the glass, an outsider who never really mastered the language. The great love of her life was her son, who my mother remembers as a child, and who loved to play with his younger sisters. He died of pneumonia in an age without penicillin, and the most vivid memories of my mother's youth was the times she heard my grandmother asking why, how could this happen in a faithful household to a son she had raised through numerous childhood illnesses, only to have him gone at age sixteen. It helps me to understand the deep expressions of love she had for all her grandchildren when we were young and fragile in a way only she could understand. I don't know what it is like to have survived a child, and I hope I never do, but in my mother's telling there was something like prayer in my grandmother's response, prayer for a lost son but also prayer for a world in which there is so much we will never understand, when all we can offer is ourselves and our arguments, our own conviction that things could be different in a world based not on guarantees but on the deepest promises of God.

I believe that is why the healing of the deaf man follows so closely, because it is a part of a single story, this openness to God's promises. Jesus draws him aside, away from the crowd that brought him, apart from the stigma to which his deafness would have condemned him. When Jesus places his fingers in his ears and touches his tongue, saying to him, "Ephphatha-- be opened," and the man regains both his hearing and his sight, the only request of Jesus is that the man maintain the secrecy which he swears to all in the gospel. The response, even to the gift, is disobedience and the proclamation of this new thing that has come

into the world. After all, he is able to hear, to really hear, to understand in a way that the disciples around Jesus cannot.

Maybe that is why the arguing is so important, because it is understanding we crave, understanding at the bedside of a dying relative, at the job that is pulled out from under us, at the son or daughter or teacher whose behavior doesn't make sense. In a world of conflict, this arguing is different because it is also a petition, a plea that we too may be opened, opened to the ways God's promises are happening in our midst, if only we had the clarity to see them. What makes the argument holy is that we too are those who are willing to have the crumbs under the table, to accept a view of the kingdom that is partial because we want to be able to hear, to hear God in the most profoundly silent places of our lives. We want to know because the promises of God are without limits. We who live in this space between the promise of the kingdom and the world we see each day also stand with our nose against the glass; we want to know why. It is in our persistence in asking that we find the living God.

It is in that spirit that we are welcoming college students into our midst this year, students who will not only work at the clinic but will be serving our guests for meals, under the heading of civic engagement. It is a requirement for them, but my own prayer for them is that they too will be opened, that their engagement will not be to satisfy a certain number of hours but to understand the deep connections we have, between one who serves and those being served. For many it will represent stepping out of a place of comfort to one where we have to engage the unknown in the stranger. My hope is that they will be unafraid to ask hard questions about equity and social justice because they are questions we ask and argue and pray about constantly. The arguments can be hard, contentious and spirited because they are what make us more human

We too who are sitting today in the midst of holy things are really engaging in such an argument. We are asking, in all we are face each day, if this is really it, the anxiety and lack of control we feel over our lives, those who sit at the bedside of those who are suffering for no reason we can understand, who worry about our world in a profoundly insecure world—is this really it? And the answer is no and yes. No, because the promises of God are always greater than we can imagine, and yes: it is in those moments that we can most know the presence of God, present in all our arguments.