

September 8, 2024 - Mark 7:24-37

Our gospel reading, this morning, introduces us to a most remarkable woman. She is clever. She is cool. But most of all she is a loving mother who will do anything to help her sick daughter. A child.

The story itself has always been one that I would just as soon skip over because, at first blush, it makes Jesus come off like some insensitive jerk. This does not sound like the Jesus that you or I know. In fact, I wonder why such a story was preserved in the gospel record anyway. But then the lectionary drops it in our Sunday morning cycle of readings and says handle it!

Let me remind you what Jesus says to the woman who is only trying to help her daughter. He says 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." Jesus, in essence, calls her a dog. Can we "rescue" Jesus here, find some way of explaining this conversation that will put him in a bit more flattering light?

The biblical commentators have certainly tried to explain. Some have said that Jesus was just having a bad day. He and the disciples had gone north, out of Galilee, the only time the gospels have Jesus leaving his native land, for some rest and relaxation. But instead, he is discovered and confronted by this insistent mother, admittedly courageous, who was violating every standard of acceptable feminine behaviour of the time by publicly conversing with a man who is not even her husband. Instead of reacting to her as he normally might, by ignoring her for example, Jesus tries to blow her off with an insult, then finally wises up and acts decent again.

It was bad day, persistent woman or not. Even the Son of God is entitled to one every so often. That is what some commentators say. I have trouble with that.

Others suggest that this event was part of Jesus' growth and development—a learning experience for him. If, as the account of his boyhood attests, "Jesus grew in wisdom and stature and in favour with God" to quote the Gospel of Luke, we may presume that his growth continued as an adult. Being raised a Jew, and being taught by heritage that Gentiles like this woman are nothing more than fuel for the fires of hell, Jesus learns here that divine love knows no boundaries, racial or otherwise. This was a "learning experience" for him. Perhaps, but I am still not comfortable.

Other biblical scholars? Some say that this bantering back and forth between Jesus and the woman was merely Jesus' way of teaching something. By his initial reluctance to care for any Gentile, he was simply giving voice to the not-so-quietly harboured feelings of his Jewish followers. By finally acceding to the woman's cry for help, Jesus was demonstrating the

inclusiveness of God's love and thereby taught his disciples that racism had no place in the kingdom. This encounter was simply one more of Jesus' parables, this time, come to life.

That is possible, but it is still a stretch though, at least for me. How about the language of that encounter, Jesus sounds awfully rough. "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs." Mom knew the ill-feeling between Jews and Gentiles but calling her a dog to her face? Umm. I don't like it.

Again, folks explain that away, and they had better! After all, calling someone a dog, even a puppy dog as the Greek here suggests, is a term of abuse, if ever there was one. But this woman was sharp enough to realize that this was only playful banter, she responded in kind, and it worked—her daughter was healed!

Okay, I can live with that, although still a bit reluctantly. I live with it best when I remember that I am reading and hearing with Western eyes and ears, and truly we must read this text through the culture of the Middle East, otherwise we are victimized by our ethnic blinders.

I believe that this story of Jesus and the Gentile mother is a truly wonderful encounter that used the playful banter of the day that is unfortunately lost on us modern readers. The gospel writer understood it, even if we do not and that is why it is with us still today.

Come to think of it, perhaps its placement in the narrative right next to the healing of the deaf man, the second part of today's gospel reading, should have given us a clue all along. Two things jump out at me from the gospel account. First, the reference to spit. Indelicate, yes, but in the ancient world, it was believed that the spit of a famous person had magically curative powers. Something akin to children knowing that a mother or father's spit is the most powerful cleaning agent in the world. "Come here, let me clean that off for you." Was Jesus' spit necessary for healing this man? I doubt it, but Mark reports it anyway.

The second thing that grabs me is this untranslated Aramaic command: "Ephphatha... Be opened!" Perhaps this is the inspired writer's way of lighting it up, setting it in flashing neon, ensuring that no one would ever miss it. We have just been reminded that the gospel knows no boundaries, not geographic, not sexual, not racial, not any.

Ephphatha... Be opened! Can the good news of Jesus Christ be limited by race? The story of a Gentile woman who sought healing for her daughter says no. Ephphatha... Be opened! Can it be limited by geography? Not in Jesus' day and certainly not in ours. Ephphatha... Be opened! What about sex or gender orientation for that matter? Sorry, not even that. Ephphatha... Be opened!

The word of Jesus to the church is loud and clear “Ephphatha... Be opened!” The gospel is not the exclusive province of one group, of one denomination or another. If we ever hope to heal the divisions that separate us, we will remember and obey the command “Ephphatha!”

The word is not just for the healing of the church. Remember, it came first to a man who needed help. The Spirit of Jesus is speaking again and saying to us who need help! “Ephphatha! Be opened!” Let your ears be open to Christ’s word of forgiveness for your sin. “Ephphatha! Be opened!” Let your eyes be open to see the opportunities God is making available in your world. “Ephphatha! Be opened!” Let your mind be open to new ways of thinking that will expand God’s will for you and yours and this world created by God in love. “Ephphatha! Be opened!” Let your mouth be opened to share what God is doing in your life. “Ephphatha! Be opened!” Let your life be open to the movement of the Spirit, open to release from whatever is scaring you, stopping you, holding you back, from becoming the person you want to be, especially the person God wants you to be.

My dear friends in Christ. Ephphatha! Be opened! It is a word we need to hear over and over and over again. In the name of the God who loves us all. In the name of the God whose love is unconditional, diverse, inclusive. *Amen.*