

Grace for everyone! (Mark 7: 24-37)

The Syrophenician Woman's Faith

24 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,²⁵ but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet.²⁶ Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.²⁷ 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.'²⁸ But she answered him, 'Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.'²⁹ Then he said to her, 'For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.'³⁰ So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Jesus Cures a Deaf Man

31 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.³² They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him.³³ He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue.³⁴ Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, 'Ephphatha', that is, 'Be opened.'³⁵ And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.³⁶ Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it.³⁷ They were astounded beyond measure, saying, 'He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.'

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Commentary

Mark recounts two Jewish healings in chapter 5 (Jairus' daughter and the bleeding woman). Here in 7: 24-37 he recounts two Gentile healings. The message is clear: the new community that Jesus is building is one of radical inclusion – an inclusion that embraces even the Gentiles! There is grace for everyone!

I want us to look first at the parallels between these two healing stories, and then to address the uncomfortable question of Jesus' initial response to the woman.

Patterns and symbols

The parallels between these two Gentile healings and the earlier Jewish healings – both the similarities and differences - highlight the symbolism in Mark's narrative.

1. There are two healings in each story.
2. A parent approaches Jesus and asks for healing for a daughter. In the first case, Jesus is approached by Jairus, leader of the synagogue and a man of honour. In this instance, he is approached by a pagan woman.
3. The parent in each case prostrates themselves before Jesus. Jairus is the leader of the local synagogue – a well-respected man and Jesus' social equal or better. The pagan woman has just committed an extraordinarily offensive breach of etiquette by interrupting Jesus in a private house, where he is a valued guest, trying (unsuccessfully!) to escape from the public eye. She could hardly be lower in status than Jesus, as their opening exchange reveals. Rabbi Eliezer sums up the contemporary attitude among Jews to Gentiles when he says, "He who eats with an idolator is like unto one who eats with a dog!"
4. There are significant elements of exclusion operating. In chapter five, the haemorrhaging woman is excluded from the synagogue by Jairus, the socially important male protagonist in the incident. Here, the pagan woman is excluded at first by Jesus, ironically playing the same role as Jairus: social and theological gatekeeper.
5. The healing of Jairus' daughter and of the man who is unable to speak happens privately.
6. Jesus speaks a word of healing in Aramaic.

7. Meals feature in both stories: Jesus orders Jairus and his wife to feed their daughter; Jesus and the Syrophenician woman have a theological debate whose metaphor is eating meals. Significantly, Jesus is about immediately to go on and feed four thousand people – Gentiles! Jesus provides what is needed so desperately: healing and food. This is God’s grace in action: “daily bread” for everyone, based not on what they “deserve” by the place they occupy in a social and theological hierarchy, but on what they most need.

We need therefore to read these two healings as part of a carefully constructed narrative. That the grace of God is available to Jewish outcasts is shocking enough; that it should also embrace Gentiles is absolutely unthinkable! Yet this is the new community of the Kingdom that Jesus is building. But Mark’s narrative itself raises the question: did this come as a shock to Jesus?

Jesus, children and dogs at the family meal table

I gave this passage to a group of people who had nothing to do with church and asked them what they understood from the story. They were unanimous and unequivocal: Jesus finds the racist and chauvinistic prejudices and stereotypes of his day that he has imbibed as a Jewish child challenged and exposed for what they are. As a result, he changes his mind about this traditional view and learns the lesson that God includes Gentiles in Jesus’ own mission!

That is not the way commentators usually treat this passage. They go to extraordinary lengths to show that Jesus knew exactly what he was doing, and was only repeating the commonly held wisdom of his day precisely in order to teach the *woman* about God’s grace! One commentator, for example, suggests that Jesus is best understood as a wandering Cynic philosopher, who happened to meet, in the woman, the only other Cynic philosopher in the area. Their conversation ought to be read as (friendly) verbal sparring of the manner typical among Cynics; there is no need to assume that Jesus holds the view that Gentiles are dogs, or ought to be criticized for his lack of compassion for the woman and her demon-possessed daughter.

The difference between the commentators and my test group is that the latter have no interest in defending Jesus or exonerating him. They assume that it is quite natural and appropriate that Jesus might have something to learn; it is not a point of criticism.

Is Jesus the teacher in this incident, or the person being taught? Look at this story within the narrative here, and make your own mind up. Three things jump out:

1. Jesus has just been arguing with the Pharisees about the “tradition of the elders”, which assumes erroneously that it expresses God’s will. Jesus’ concern is for its victims; their exclusion and suffering show that it is not. Does the Syrophenician woman similarly show Jesus that his anti-Gentile and chauvinistic prejudices are similarly “the tradition of the elders”, rather than an expression of God’s will and character (Torah)?
2. Jesus has just said that it is what *comes out* of a person that defiles, because it expresses the “defilement of the heart”. It is difficult to dismiss any sense of “defilement” in Jesus’ initial response to the woman.
3. Jesus’ noticeable absence of compassion leads him to “withhold the food” at the family table, hoarding it for “the family and their children” (ie the Jews). Immediately after his encounter with the woman, Jesus looks at a vast Gentile crowd and “has compassion” on them because they have nothing to eat (8:2). This leads to him feeding the crowd. Has he learned something about his own convictions about God’s compassion and grace? Has the teacher of God’s expansive heart been taught something further about it ... from someone he believed was excluded from it?

“He makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak!”

Jesus is about to take the disciples on to Caesarea Philippi, which is the turning point of the gospel. This is where he will challenge them with the Way of the Cross. Peter

will declare him to be the Messiah (8:29) and Jesus will try in vain to explain to him (and the others) that they have got their expectations about what that means all wrong: it entails suffering and rejection. The disciples will prove “deaf” to this message.

Similarly, Peter, who proclaims Jesus to be the Messiah, will be reduced to mute silence when challenged to admit, “I’m with him!” This is a deliberate narrative irony on Mark’s part: Jesus can make the deaf hear and the mute speak, but cannot get the message of the Way of the Cross through to his disciples.

The challenge for us as the church that reads Mark’s story is to identify our own areas of blindness, deafness and muteness to what Jesus’ call to “take up our cross and follow” entails.

Going deeper into the text (Mark7: 24-37)

All groups establish boundaries to determine who is in and who is out. Boundaries can be a good thing, such as when they help protect weaker people from domination by stronger people. Just think of school rules that protect the victim from the bully. However, often we see that when this “defensive” function is usually cited as justification for boundaries, more often the actual relations of power are the opposite: boundaries function to separate the strong from the weak, protecting privilege and maintaining inequality. Often our home address, our postcode, prevents some children from attending good schools, because often the good schools have “postcode boundaries” or “household income boundaries” or even “Church attendance boundaries”. It is such boundaries that Jesus consistently challenges, as he does in the story of the Syrophenician women.

The story of the Syrophenician woman is the central object lesson in this section’s argument for inclusivity. This woman, marginalised by race, gender and class, taught Jesus something about the inclusivity of God’s realm. Jesus comes to see more fully

the radical inclusivity of the gospel he proclaims through the trust and daring of this woman. He is moved from the social norms of first-century Mediterranean “honor culture” that limited his vision and compassion. He is moved from a stance of excluding to one of including.

We too live in a society in which status, privilege, and even the right to life are determined by class, race, gender, and sexual preference. We are called to dismantle the barriers that exclude.

Beginning to recognize privilege, although unsettling, is a necessary first step to overturning the systems and ideologies that marginalize. The following small group exercise provides a useful tool for recognizing privilege. With a small group, perhaps from your faith community, focus the exercise on one of the following: male privilege, white privilege, class privilege, or heterosexual privilege.

Arrange chairs so that those with privilege (e.g men, whites, the wealthy, heterosexual) sit in the inner circle. The others sit on the outskirts of the circle. Those in the inner circle begin to name the “assets” of the privilege that they “cash in on” at will. As the “assets” are named loudly and clearly, one person from the outskirts records them on a large paper. After those in the inner circle are done, those on the out skirts add to the list. When the exercise is completed, all share their feelings with one another.

In order to catalyse your thinking, consider the following list of white privileges:

- When my son is fixing a friend’s car radio, he is not in danger of being arrested for car theft.
- When I see paintings of God or Jesus Christ, the skin is the same colour as mine.

- When I am told about our national heritage or about “civilization” I am shown that people of my colour made it what it is.
- When I use cheques, credit cards, or cash, I can count on my skin colour not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.
- I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.
- I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.
- I can swear, or dress in second hand clothes, or not answer letters without having people attribute these choices to the bad manners, the poverty, or the illiteracy of my race.

Where do we go from here? Jesus’ example of learning from this woman and being moved by her to deeper faithfulness invites us to learn from her as well. Jesus’ receptivity to her wisdom points to a critical truth: oppressed and excluded people often have a profound analysis of social situations, and know the paths to justice. People in authority need to heed them.

Following Jesus’ example of listening to and learning from this woman. Listen for her voice in your world.

Who does the church have to listen to in your community?

Make a commitment to be increasingly aware of privilege as you walk through daily life. Begin to point it out to your friends and associates and be the “leverage” for the oppressed.

All age worship ideas (Mark 7: 24-37)

The inclusive kingdom

In cricket the bowler wants to pressure the batsman onto the back foot/whereas the batsman can get a clearer connection with the ball when he is on the front foot. This is an interesting passage where it appears that Jesus is caught a little on the back

foot by the Woman. She determinedly walks in for the sake of her child and almost demands help from Jesus.

In most of these situations Jesus develops them into training for his disciples. Yet again his engagement with this Woman challenges the purity laws that govern who you should mix with. Like the Woman who touched Jesus garment this Woman shows equal determination and tenacity. She has a sick child and she has faith that Jesus can do something about it. In this man she sees not someone who has come just for one people in one place at one time but for all – Jesus strange response backs that up as he begins by playing along with tradition in order to make the point that no is exempt from the kingdom that is arriving in and through him. He affirms again that faith is crucial to entering into the kingdom life and the author of Mark pits the faith of this ‘outsider’ against the fumbling of the disciples and the rejection of the religious folk.

Ideas

Play indoor cricket – make sure the ball is very soft!!

Often when religious people hold too tightly to a viewpoint it can cause them to lose sight of grace and they start to focus all their attention on what they deem to be faults in others. Jesus is training his friends to rise above such thoughts and to see the value of every human being not least those who are ‘outside’ the traditional understanding of ‘God’s people’. Jesus hasn’t come to condemn people but to offer life in God’s kingdom.

Film clip: The Hunchback of Notre Dame

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n2YiCqv28Vs> – Judge Claude Frollo and Esmeralda. Frollo has set himself up as the moral and just guardian of the city when in truth he seeks only to exercise his own prejudice against those different and to gratify his own desires. Here Esmeralda, representing the very people he hates most, gives him a lesson in justice and freedom.

Prayer idea

Cut out people shapes from paper or card of different colours and invite people to write prayers on them. Either pray for God to forgive us where we have judged, been unkind to or talked unjustly about a person different from us. Pray for opportunities to be accepting and welcoming and affirming of people of every variety as we all reflect the nature and image of God. Either stick these to the wall in a line or around a large globe on large flip chart or card. Play soft music.

Liturgies and hymns Mark 2: 1-12

This is where you can find hymn suggestions and liturgies for use with this week's text.

Our passage today may lend itself to a service for healing and wholeness, so here are prayers that explore that theme

Here is a meditation card that might make a good slide as an introduction to worship:

For the silent prayers
deep in our hearts
that have no words
but simply images
held out to you
of those we love
and those we miss,
the suffering, the sick,
the lonely and the lost.
Hear our prayers,
the offering of our hearts,
and bless the ones
we lay before you now.



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A call to worship:

Give thanks to the Lord and call upon his name:

All make known his deeds among the peoples.

Sing to God, sing praises to his name:

All and speak of all his marvellous works.

Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God almighty:

All who was and is and is to come.

God the Father, your will for all people is health and salvation.

All We praise and bless you, Lord.

God the Son, you came that we might have life,

And might have it more abundantly.

All We praise and bless you, Lord.

God the Holy Spirit, you make our bodies the temple of your presence.

All We praise and bless you, Lord.

Holy Trinity, one God, in you we live and move and have our being.

All We praise and bless you, Lord.

Another call to worship:

Leader: We come in this service to God

All: In our need, and bringing with us the needs of the World

Leader: We come to God, who has come to us in Jesus,

All: And who walks with us the road of our worlds Suffering.

Leader: We come with our faith and with our doubts;

All: We come with our hopes and with our fears.

Leader: We come as we are,

Because it is God who invites us to come.

All: And God has promised never to turn us away.

Prayers of Penitence:

The gospel calls us to turn away from sin
And be faithful to Christ.

As we offer ourselves to him in penitence and faith,
We renew our confidence and trust in his mercy.

Cast your burden upon the Lord

All and he will sustain you.

In returning and rest

All you shall be saved.

In quietness and trust

All shall be your strength.

There follows a period of silent reflection and self-examination.

One or other of the following or another suitable form may be used

You raise the dead to life in the Spirit:

Lord, have mercy.

All Lord, have mercy.

You bring pardon and peace to the sinner:

Christ, have mercy.

All Christ, have mercy.

You bring light to those in darkness:

Lord, have mercy.

All Lord, have mercy.

Absolution:

God, the Father of mercies,
has reconciled the world to himself
through the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ,
not holding our sins against us,
but sending his Holy Spirit
to shed abroad his love among us.

By the ministry of reconciliation
entrusted by Christ to his Church,
receive his pardon and peace
to stand before him in his strength alone
this day and for evermore.

All Amen.

A variety of Prayers of Intercession ideal for a service of wellbeing:

Lord, grant your healing grace to all who are sick, injured or disabled,
That they may be made whole.

All Hear us, Lord of life.

Grant to all who are lonely, anxious or depressed
a knowledge of your will and an awareness of your presence.

All Hear us, Lord of life.

Grant to all who minister to those who are suffering
Wisdom and skill, sympathy and patience.

All Hear us, Lord of life.

Mend broken relationships, and restore to those in distress
Soundness of mind and serenity of spirit.

All Hear us, Lord of life.

Sustain and support those who seek your guidance
And lift up all who are brought low by the trials of this life.

All Hear us, Lord of life.

Grant to the dying peace and a holy death,
And uphold by the grace and consolation of your Holy Spirit those who are bereaved.

All Hear us, Lord of life.

Restore to wholeness whatever is broken by human sin,
In our lives, in our nation, and in the world.

All Hear us, Lord of life.

You are the Lord who does mighty wonders.

All You have declared your power among the peoples.

With you, Lord, is the well of life

All and in your light do we see light.

Hear us, Lord of life:

All heal us, and make us whole.

Let us pray.

A period of silence follows.

O Lord our God, accept the fervent prayers of your people;
in the multitude of your mercies look with compassion upon us and all who turn to
you for help;
for you are gracious, O lover of souls,
and to you we give glory, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
now and for ever.

Amen.

Another prayer of intercession:

O Jesus, you who walk with the wounded along the road of our world's suffering, we seek your grace of healing for the broken people and places of our world:

O God, open to us today the sea of your mercy and water us with full streams, from the riches of your grace and springs of your kindness. Make us children of quietness and heirs of peace: kindle in us the fire of your love; strengthen our weakness by your power and bind us closer to you and to each other.

We bring to God someone whom we remember today, and for whom we want to pray...

We bring to God someone who is hurting today and needs our prayer

We bring to God a troubled situation in our world today...

We bring to God anyone whom we find hard to forgive or trust...

We bring ourselves to God that we might grow in generosity of spirit, clarity of mind, and warmth of affection.

Amen

Leader: Jesus said "Come to me all who are troubled and I will give you rest" So come, you who are burdened by regrets and anxieties, you who are broken in body or spirit, you who are torn by relationships and by doubt, you who feel deeply within yourselves the divisions and injustices of our world. Come, for Jesus invites us to bring him all brokenness.

Silence

Amen

Sometimes it's difficult to introduce prayers for others in a family service. Look at this clip from the hunchback of Notre dame where Esmerelda prays for others. This might be used to lead into prayers for others

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MEEpavnk7Uw>

Lyrics from "The Hunchback of Notre-Dame"

Composed by Alan Menken and Stephen Schwartz

I don't know if You can hear me
Or if You're even there
I don't know if You would listen
To a gypsy's prayer
Yes, I know I'm just an outcast
I shouldn't speak to You
Still I see Your face and wonder
Were You once an outcast too?

God help the outcasts

Hungry from birth
Show them the mercy
They don't find on earth
God help my people
We look to You still
God help the outcasts
Or nobody will

I ask for wealth
I ask for fame
I ask for glory to shine on my name
I ask for love I can possess
I ask for God and His angels to bless me

I ask for nothing
I can get by
But I know so many
Less lucky than I
Please help my people
The poor and downtrod
I thought we all were
The children of God
God help the outcasts
Children of God!

Lyrics compiled by Disneyclips.com