

Be Open

A Sermon for Every Sunday Summer, Pentecost 15B

Mark 7:24-27

In my church's tradition we walk the gospel down the aisle, someone reads the assigned passage, and when it is over he or she says, "The Gospel of the Lord," and the people reply, "Praise to you, Lord Christ." But on a day like this one, as the gospel is making its way back up the aisle, someone might ask, "Wait a minute—did Jesus just call that woman a dog?"

And the answer, in short, is, yes, he did. This is a very troubling passage for us, because while it might not be a sin to be that rude, it is certainly poor manners and it hurts our feelings thinking Jesus could be so cruel. This is not the way Jesus is usually portrayed by the writers of the gospels. Oh, he has plenty of harsh things to say, but it's almost always to the powers and principalities and to the people who are in charge of things. It's never, except on this occasion, to a woman who was desperate to see her child healed, who was weak and an outsider, who was not part of the inner circle, and who just needed the healing touch of God. To her, Jesus says, "it is not good to give the children's food to the dogs". So, we have to pause and wonder what that means.

A safer thing might be to simply talk about the letter of James, because there's plenty in James for us to talk about. But I think it might be good to hang on here and see if

we can't wrestle some meaning out of this perplexing text and see if we can't figure out why Jesus is doing what he's doing.

Let's begin with some context, and see if that helps.

There are tensions underlying today's text, particularly a cultural tension between the Hebrew people and the Gentiles in the region. It's been going on a really long time, and there are at least 12 occasions in Hebrew Scripture when the Hebrew people call the gentiles in this region "dogs". It appears to be their favorite slur for the gentiles. I can only imagine the gentiles had their own favorite slurs to sling back at the Hebrew people. Therefore, Jesus' use of the term "dog" didn't come completely out of the blue. But still, it's harsh. I even remember reading a scholar long ago who, trying to soften the blow a little, suggested that the word for dog here really means "puppies". Therefore, Jesus is being playful, he's teasing her. That can't be it, can it? No. Our wrestling match with the text continues.

Let's back it up just a little bit more for a broader context. Let's remember what Jesus was doing just before today's lesson. Jesus is in an ever-increasing tense argument with the powers and the authorities, the Pharisees and some of the Sadducees. He has nothing good to say to them ever in the Gospel. Particularly, in chapter 7, Jesus accuses them of being more concerned with the external than they are with the internal. They're more concerned with the appearance of things than with the reality of things. They're more concerned with their power and their position than they are with actually doing the work they were given to do; more concerned with their role in

religion than they are with the power of religion to actually transform people's lives.

In fact, in the chapters to come, Jesus will lay this criticism out very clearly.

Jesus says to them, you are more concerned about external threats to your power and purity than you are about your internal condition. You think that things that are going to defile you are outside of you. In your profound concern about external threats you refuse to see where real defilement comes from—inside your own heart. All of the vile things in the world are born right inside the human heart and anything that comes out is just a reflection of what was in there from the start. That's the conflict that Jesus is in when he has this conversation with the Syro-Phoenician woman. This, at least, helps us understand why Jesus might not have been immediately receptive to her request.

Perhaps our understanding of this passage is expanded further if we think about it in a literary way. Jesus is going to say something and then he will actually act it out. Jesus has asked for some privacy so he could get a little rest, but a fierce gentile mom of a sick daughter, thinks that Jesus is a source of healing for her girl. She sees something in Jesus, she doesn't know what it is, she just knows he has this power. She wants what he has for her daughter. She does what any fierce mom of a sick child would do. Nap be damned, she bursts through the door, walks in and says, “I need you to heal my daughter”.

Jesus starts out by saying “it is not good to give the food for the children to the dogs”.

He starts with the accepted assumption that she is out, she is an outsider, and she is

not part of what's going on inside. He starts by saying the same thing everyone else around him might have said. "I'm not giving this precious thing to the dogs".

The Fierce mom has a great rebuttal. She says "yes, but even the dogs get the crumbs from the master's table". Clearly, she sees things completely differently, she's not obsessed with the whole inside/outside thing at all. She wants what Jesus has. She has no need for the external image of things. She wants, no she needs, the internal reality of God's healing power. She wants that.

As in many other places in scripture, Jesus is amazed at the faith of the perceived outsider. In this case, he is so amazed he simply accepts her rebuke. He accepts it as if she is actually now teaching Jesus something. He seems to say, "Oh! Well, for saying that you have what you ask for-your daughter is well".

Continuing with our literary interpretation, what happens next? The very next thing that happens appears at first to be an interruption in the narrative. Jesus is confronted by a man who can't hear, and he can't understand and he can't speak. Jesus puts his fingers in the man's ears, and says be open, be open. Jesus takes his fingers out and the man can hear and understand, and he can speak.

Do you see the movement here? The people Jesus is in conflict with are closed off, they can't hear, they can't see, they're concerned that everything outside of them is dangerous, and that everything inside them is to be protected. He has this encounter with fierce outsider, and she flips the whole inside/outside thing on its head. What is

inside comes out and there is healing. And all of the sudden we, like the deaf man, can hear what he is saying, we can understand. Now we get it.

I think this story, in its context, actually works to open our ears as the hearers, and to open our hearts to see what Jesus is doing in the world. Jesus, by coming into the world, is turning the whole inside/outside conflict thing on its head. Is flipping that part of us as human beings that is utterly convinced that we have what we need and everything outside of us is dangerous and threatening.

When we believe that everything outside is to be feared, and that we already have everything we need for health and wholeness, we build up walls, literal and metaphorical, we create emotional things that separate us, assuming that we are safe, and that the other is dangerous. But actually, when we do that, we are in the most dangerous position of all, because now the only thing we've got is us. And tragically, that is often the source of the real pain and sadness and danger in your life and mine. But when we encounter Jesus and allow him to tear down the walls we have created, we are cracked open. And the cracks allow all of that "us" to get out, and it allows the healing power of God to come in- to come into our hearts and to touch that which is broken, to heal that which is sick, to exercise that which is possessed, to open us up to the healing power of Jesus.

And we say, oh. Now I understand.

And almost magically, it loses our tongues. We can speak what we know. When we put down our defenses, when we break down the walls and when we open our hearts

to God's presence, we are changed. Once we let go of the whole insider/outsider obsession, we can speak about the power and the healing and the freedom that comes with a life in Christ.

—*Chuck Treadwell* © 2021