

Opening and Weaving

The Rev. Geoff Parker to First Parish Church - Brunswick, ME

Sunday, September 20, 2015

Scripture: [Mark 7:24-37](#)

Introduction to the Scripture

Today we will hear two healing stories of Jesus's ministry. In both, a person of extraordinary faith receives a healing blessing from Jesus. In one, Jesus receives the blessing, I might say.

We often talk about Jesus in the kind of old words of creeds as "wholly human and wholly divine." So. Here's this scripture reading to totally mess with your head on that, because boy howdy, he sounds awfully human at first. You see, there's a Syrophenician woman. As in, the bad people that all the good people of Israel looked down on... but one day, she decided to challenge all that... listen in.

Sermon

It isn't often that Jesus is maybe not the holiest person in the room in the scriptures. I mean, he had a mother and a father and a family just like everybody else, so I bet you there were plenty of examples they could have told us about... but those never made it in the official record so to speak. There are some who try to apologize for this text by saying that Jesus is testing the woman in need. Which is fine, but just practically speaking, isn't Jesus-like. He doesn't deploy that sort of tactic as a teaching or ministering tool, and I would encourage none of us to do it either.

Really, we get to see our humanity on display along with Jesus's here at the beginning of our scripture. He doesn't just reject the plea for healing at first, he tosses off a subtle racial slur at her as a Syrophenician. This doesn't feel like a hopeful moment here for a holy conversation.

But let's take a moment and give thanks for holy women ^[1] who rescue moments like this, who insist on justice: Desperate, loving her child, isolated even more than she would be as a Syrophenician, because there's a demon with her daughter... she throws the insult back at Jesus with a final plea. Who knows if she thought it would work, or if it was just a chance to get vent before she turned and went home to face the grim reality of her family. Unheard, unhelped, unhealed.

If we're honest, all of us have probably been on both sides of this interaction at one time or another in our lives. All of us have probably been in need of one sort or another and encountered well-meaning or not people who just don't seem to even hear us before they offer a platitude, or a rejection of our need, or sometimes even worse... help in no way related to your need, better suited to making them feel better than you.

If we are honest, we have all been Jesus at one time or another, here. And this isn't the good kind of being like Jesus. How many of us have occasionally leapt to "solve" someone's problem before hearing what is most heart wrenching, most important?

The holiest thing I find in this scripture though, today? The opening of Jesus. The very reality that here we are known and loved by a God so powerful as to come and learn something from us... I really do believe that Jesus learns something here in this story. Challenged by the faith of this woman, whose name we never even know, he shows us our best hope... we can miss the mark, come up short, fail to be our best selves... and we can be changed. We can suddenly find ourself on the holy ground of listening.

When helping, listening is more than half the battle, as generations of various charitable givers will tell you. The most glaring example of this need is right there in the basic stuff of life, food. When disaster strikes, food systems are upset. The international community has always struggled with how to provide aid. Thankfully, these days we are listening as we do it. Old models included shipping our food around the world, which may not be helpful, nutritional, or long lasting enough to survive the trip. Once on the ground, food aid shipped around the world destroys the food economy of the area meant to be helped. New models strive to listen to those in need, providing assistance to the most locally available food sources and producers, so that the food system and economy of the area is righted as aid is provided.

Over the last few years, the Outreach committee has been talking and exploring a lot about listening, about how we can support those who listen and provide the hoped for healing in our community rather than dumping our perceived “solutions” into complex systems of need. Aided partly by a book called [Toxic Charity](#) that they have both been moved by, and really troubled by... which, may we all read such books from time to time... They began to have incredible open and honest conversations about the value and frustration of so many models of helping that don't seem to take into account the humans we are trying to help.

I would say it is impressive how they have put that desire into their ministry... Here, in our grant recipients, you have organizations who are listening.

Groups that simply bear witness and walk alongside youth in our community like the Bath Skatepark and the People Plus Teen Center and with adults in need of a safe, warm place at the Gathering Place.

Camp Postcard who teaches young people that there are law enforcement professionals who view them as humans to relate to, not problems to solve. The Restorative Justice Institute which seeks to provide a communal listening for how we can seek justice in ways that seek the wholeness of victims and perpetrators over

Here you have Sexual Assault Support Services of Midcoast Maine... who begin with the hearing, believing, and empowering of victims stories. And Brunswick Respite Care who listen for the needs of care givers.

Here you have groups that listen for the creative spirit within each of us and all of us, and seek to unleash the unique creativity in those who may feel isolated and alone to reach out... Spindleworks and Art Van.

How do I know that Jesus learned? When he goes to heal the next man, he incorporates a new practice into his healing. Now, for us, we think maybe Jesus was coming up with something original, but in the culture of his time, Jesus suddenly starts behaving like a folk magician. He doesn't often come off as a guy who needs to spit or say magic words or stick his fingers in your ears to make healing happen... see, what's changed is he's providing the healing the deaf man wanted. He's meeting him where he is, offering the magic that will help him... even if the real magic just came through Jesus's care and compassion. What a model and a challenge to us all.

One of the great things about this new model of doing our Outreach grants is that we get to see you all [the recipients], know you, give thanks for you... and we get to share this story and this challenge today for all of us as we work together in the days ahead:

Be opened. Be listening.

When the needs of those you serve change, will you listen?

When there is a whole other population you never imagined being a part of your ministry knocking on your door, will you be opened, will you listen?

When someone holds out an opportunity to serve that comes with the nasty side effect of all opportunities, the possibility of failure... will you be opened, will you listen, will you risk?

I absolutely believe that this is a holy story in our scripture... that we have been promised that no less than the Son of God came not to be sure how to help and save... but to find us where we were, to learn us, to be changed by the experience of being us... and so as we go forward, let us struggle to be more Christ-like... as messy and as human, as *open* as that is. Amen.

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1. Another of my favorites, the widow who confronts the unjust judge in [Luke](#). ↩