

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 35:4-7
SECOND LESSON: Mark 7:24-37
September 8, 2024

“Healing the Ones Outside”
Sermon Lisa C. Farrell

The text we read this morning from the New Testament is both startling and disturbing. It’s startling because we normally assume that outreach to Gentiles only really took place after Jesus’ death and resurrection, particularly under the ministry of Paul. But here Jesus is in Gentile territory, apparently quite deliberately. He left the Jewish region and went into Tyre. Sidon and Tyre was the home of Jezebel, the enemy of Elijah. Ezekiel and Zechariah weren’t exactly fond of the region either. (I Kings 6:31; Ezekiel 26: 15-17; Zechariah 9:3) This region is now the coastal plain of Lebanon with the Mediterranean on one side and mountains on the other. Then and now it was most definitely NOT the land of Israel.

There were a few Jews living in this mixed area, and Jesus may have been staying with a Jewish family, but he didn’t want anyone to know he was there. Maybe he just needed to get away from all the constant demands. If so, those demands followed him. Word got out that the healer had arrived, and he was approached by a woman who broke all social taboos. She was an unaccompanied woman, a Greek, a Syrophenician no less, with a demon afflicted daughter. Parents of children suffering from deadly conditions can be very persistent. They will travel miles to seek help. They will seek the best hospitals and top experts. And they will often ask for help even when to do so is considered rude or socially inappropriate. Any scruples and self-consciousness they might have for themselves are set aside for the sake of their child. This woman was that kind of parent. She knew that what she was asking was outrageous, and she did it anyway. When she received an answer that on the face of it was a “no,” she pushed back. Her pride didn’t matter. Her little girl came first. This woman had faith. She knew Jesus could heal her daughter and she was not going to take no for an answer.

The disturbing part of this interaction is Jesus’ initial answer to her plea. “First let the children eat all they want, for it is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.” As much as we might want to soft pedal it, this is very offensive. To be called a dog in this world was the lowest type of insult. And I cannot for the life of me square this response with the Jesus I see elsewhere in scripture. This Jesus comes across like an uncaring xenophobic misogynist. But perhaps the problem here is the same one we encounter with text messages. We can get into a lot of trouble texting, because a text has no facial expression or tone. The same words can be read very differently, and most of us have gotten into hot water at one time or another as a result. Even

generational matters make a difference. Older people might just text “K” meaning “okay” and think nothing of it, while for a younger generation that response is a deliberate insult.

Because the written word does not always get the whole story across, it is possible that what Jesus was actually doing was playing the devil’s advocate and saying something that his peers would have said, *except that they would have meant it*. It is possible he gave her the standard line and waited to see what she would do with it. And she showed her character and determination in her response. “Lord,” she replied, “even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” This is middle eastern bargaining at its best. She was not going to be put off by the party line. This was her child’s life at stake. And Jesus said, “For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter.” She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

It is interesting to me that two people with the most incredible faith—the centurion whose servant was healed at a distance and this woman, were outside of the people of God. Both of these people had their request for miraculous healing answered with Jesus not even laying eyes on the one in need. And both had the absolute trust that when they returned home it would be as Jesus said it would be.

When Jesus left Tyre and Sidon he headed into the Decapolis, an area that literally means “ten cities.” There were actually more than ten cities, but apparently the consortium started with ten, the middle eastern city of Philadelphia being one of them. The Decapolis is located in what is now Jordan. But this was and is a predominantly non-Jewish region, and Jesus was ministering there! Word had spread of a Jewish prophet who could heal. Some of the people brought a man who was deaf with speech problems and begged Jesus to lay hands on him. We would expect that a person who was deaf would not be able to speak, but it is possible this man was not born deaf. For reasons that we do not know, Jesus took this man aside, away from the crowd. Maybe what was happening was just too overwhelming for the man and Jesus had compassion on him. Jesus then did some very physical things, things that would help the man understand what was happening. He put his fingers in the man’s ears and spit and touched the man’s tongue. He looked up to heaven and said, “Be opened!” None of this was strictly necessary. Jesus healed others without even going near them. But God always communicates with us in our own context in a way we can understand.

I have seen healing happen over a period of time and known that God was at work, but I have never witnessed instant healing. I have no doubt Jesus could do it. Unfortunately, there are a lot of frauds around today exploiting desperate people. This man was healed. It made quite an impression. People were amazed and word spread. And just like the desperate woman who came on behalf of her daughter, this man was also an outsider. He was an outsider in his own community because of his disability, and an outsider from the point of view of the Jewish people. Because the majority of Jesus’ interactions took place in a Jewish context it is somewhat surprising to learn that he actually embraced a larger ministry above and beyond the nation of Israel during his lifetime. The Old Testament also has stories that include this broader

perspective. Jonah was sent to Nineveh, which is outside of Mosul in Iraq. But we draw lines around peoples and groups. We spend a lot of time excluding and defining in our world.

Some time ago I found this story from World War II and tucked it away. A few soldiers serving in France wanted to bury a friend and fellow soldier who had been killed. If you have ever spoken to veterans of this war, you will know that many did not have the benefit of any kind of burial. Soldiers from all nations lay where they fell. But there must have been enough of a lull in the fighting for this group to approach the priest of a little Catholic Church and ask if their comrade could be buried in the very pretty little cemetery next to the church, the one with the low stone wall around it. When they approached the priest, however, he answered that unless their friend was a Catholic he could not be buried in the cemetery. The soldier who died was not a Catholic. Feeling compassion for these men the priest then showed them a spot outside the walls where they could bury him. Reluctantly they dug the hole and performed whatever kind of informal service they could to say goodbye. The next day they returned for a final farewell before they were moved on with the rest of their unit. They couldn't find the grave. They were confused. "It was right here!" they said. So they approached the priest who took them to a spot now inside the cemetery walls. "Last night I couldn't sleep," said the priest. "I was troubled that your friend had to be buried outside the walls, so I got up and moved the stones."

There's a lot of people outside of these doors who have faith. They may not have ever been inside a church, but they are seeking God. We don't have to change them to include them. Jesus met people where they were and spoke to them in a way that they could understand. We can also meet people where they are, and we can move the stones. Amen

Isaiah 35:4-7

⁴ say to those with fearful hearts,

 "Be strong, do not fear;

your God will come,

 he will come with vengeance;

with divine retribution

 he will come to save you."

⁵ Then will the eyes of the blind be opened

 and the ears of the deaf unstopped.

⁶ Then will the lame leap like a deer,

 and the mute tongue shout for joy.

Water will gush forth in the wilderness

 and streams in the desert.

⁷ The burning sand will become a pool,

 the thirsty ground bubbling springs.

In the haunts where jackals once lay,

 grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.

Mark 7:24-37

²⁴ Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret. ²⁵ In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an impure spirit came and fell at his feet. ²⁶ The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter.

²⁷ “First let the children eat all they want,” he told her, “for it is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.”

²⁸ “Lord,” she replied, “even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”

²⁹ Then he told her, “For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter.”

³⁰ She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

³¹ Then Jesus left the vicinity of Tyre and went through Sidon, down to the Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis. ³² There some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk, and they begged Jesus to place his hand on him.

³³ After he took him aside, away from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers into the man’s ears. Then he spit and touched the man’s tongue. ³⁴ He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, “*Ephphatha!*” (which means “Be opened!”). ³⁵ At this, the man’s ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly.

³⁶ Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone. But the more he did so, the more they kept talking about it. ³⁷ People were overwhelmed with amazement. “He has done everything well,” they said. “He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.”