

Sermon, Proper 18, Year B, September 5, 2021, Jane A. Beebe

“For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.” (Mark 7:29)

Today’s Gospel reading is an extraordinary—and on the surface a discomfiting—story of healing. Jesus has just been in Jerusalem where some scribes and Pharisees have criticized him and his disciples for not washing their hands before eating. Jesus asserts that real defilement does not come from outside the person but takes place in the heart. If, as in last week’s epistle from James (James 1:22), we are to be not merely hearers, but doers of the word, we must allow that word to sink deep within us. We must become open to having a “change of heart”—which is what conversion is. As is said in the 12-step tradition, transformation or recovery is an “inside job.” I think today’s Gospel reading illustrates what can happen when God’s word, the incarnate word, is given voice. It emerges with all its power to heal: a pebble that, when it is dropped in a pond, has ripple effects we can neither predict nor control.

The Gospel of Mark goes by quickly in terse, compressed sentences. A lot takes place in the space of a few words, and yet today’s story is quite visual and compelling. I imagine these scenes, first with the Syrophoenician woman, and then with the deaf man, almost as film reels. It is in the closeups that we see what is really happening. At the beginning of today’s passage, Jesus has sought solitude, perhaps in frustration or weariness. He has just stepped into a house. We have no

details about the household: who lives there, or what connection Jesus may have with them. The Gospel writer tells us that Jesus does not want anyone to know he is there. We do not always have an indication of what Jesus is thinking and feeling so this is a telling detail.

Inevitably Jesus cannot escape notice. The Syrophoenician woman learns where Jesus is *immediately*. The writer of Mark uses the word “immediately” 41 times—that’s 70% of the occurrences of this word in the whole of the New Testament! The Greek word does mean “immediately” but it also has the sense of a straight path. There are no detours. Before we know anything about who this woman is, we learn that she has a *little* daughter. Again, in a passage with few details, I find the use of the diminutive moving. This is a small, vulnerable human being. The daughter is afflicted with an unclean spirit. The woman bows down at Jesus’ feet. In the Greek it is more strongly stated: she *falls* at his feet.

Then we learn that the woman is a Syrophoenician Gentile. On the basis of culture, religion, ethnicity, and gender there could not be a deeper divide between this woman and Jesus. Yet ignoring all the implications of that divide, ignoring her own dignity and standing she begs Jesus to cast the demon out of her daughter. It is possible that this woman is of some means. I can imagine she has tried everything humanly possible to help her child. It would take some desperation for her to seek Jesus. Perhaps she has been looking for him for a while.

At this point what is our expectation? The last time Jesus has been approached to heal a child, he not only raises that child from the dead, but almost inadvertently heals a hemorrhaging woman along the way. Jesus seems to have had no qualms about being made unclean by that woman and says to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.” (Mark 5:34). Isn’t that what we want, what we need to hear now? “Go in peace...”

Instead, Jesus says, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” (Mark 7:27) I think it is not useful to try to explain or justify an ethnic slur from Jesus’ mouth. Some have said he was being ironic or wry. Some have said he was testing this woman. Some just cut to the chase: the child is ultimately healed. Yet, given what she has risked, what she has already been through that would cause her to beg Jesus for help, I can’t simply gloss over her pain and jump to a happy ending.

What saves me here is the tradition of grasping hold of God and wrestling until some blessing is wrung from the encounter—through the night if need be. This woman, this amazing woman, finds it in herself to not only make a reply, but to take Jesus’ own words to affirm a different way forward. She says politely (!), “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” (Mark 7:28) In one short, witty sentence, she manages to turn everything around. In her mind, the dogs are not wild, scavenging dogs, but domesticated dogs. They are lying under the

table. The dogs are part of the household, not to be feared. However, the woman suggests that the dogs under the table can be satisfied with the children's crumbs.

We have already had the feeding of the five thousand in Mark chapter 6. We know that even after all five thousand were fed there were twelve baskets of broken pieces left over—not to mention fish. Do you every wonder where all these pieces, these crumbs, went? I think this woman is affirming that God's kingdom is more expansive than we can ever imagine. Using her wit, she invites Jesus back into the very kingdom he has been proclaiming. Then Jesus says, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." (Mark 7:29)

What is it the woman has really said? Is it merely because she has said something clever that she gets Jesus' attention? She clearly demonstrates her faith and love. We almost miss the power of what the woman has done in the English translation. A literal translation is, "*Because of this word, go...*" Perhaps because we spent several weeks with chapter 6 in the Gospel of John, with its extended meditation on the relation of the incarnate word with daily bread, I find the appearance of the *logos*, the Word, even more startling. God's presence cannot help but break in. I believe it is in *that* moment that the woman's child is healed. God's life-giving word has been proclaimed and received; it transcends time and space.

It is not for nothing that the next healing Jesus performs is to restore hearing and speech to a Gentile man. Especially in a society where what is shared in religious community is based on an oral tradition, to be unable to hear and speak means this man cannot engage fully with those around him. God's word is not something that exists only on a scroll, a page, or a screen. It is alive. It is important to listen for God's word. Yet it seems clear that God receives what we have to say also—when it is said with authenticity and love.

We do not know how the lives of those Jesus has healed in today's stories may have been changed going forward. I do wonder about the daughter, free to grow up, to hear, to speak without a demon controlling her. I wonder if her mother tells her the story of how she was healed. Is she proud of her mother for her perseverance, great love, and powerful words? Neither the Syrophenician woman, nor her small daughter, nor the deaf man are named. I find this is often an invitation to imagine where we might fit in the story. Who has offered a good word to us? When have we shared our bread with others? When have we persevered with someone who seems to be a polar opposite, only to find nourishment or healing love?