

Being Opened

At first glance, they seem like just two more run of the mill stories about miraculous healings by Jesus. We might be tempted to yawn. In fact, the first thing that came to my mind as I finished my first reading of these stories during my prep for today was how they fit in with some humorous clichés. Back in the dark ages, when I was a child, it was still considered acceptable to tell ethnic jokes in polite company. In St. Louis, some of the favorites, possibly because of a sizable minority community of these folks, were Polish Jokes, which played on the supposed intellectual deficiencies of that nationality. When I was in high school, not long after the election of Karol Wojtyla as Pope John Paul II, this one made the rounds: “Did you hear the Polish Pope performed his first miracle? He made a deaf man blind.” Of course, it didn’t take long to realize that the Polish Pope was a man of outstanding intellect, a theologian and pastor worthy of his august position. The other cliché I thought of as I read these stories of Jesus performing healings is the trope in some blues songs that the singer’s woman is so fine she causes miracles – blind men see her, lame men chase after her, old men feel young, and so forth. In fact, I coincidentally was listening to Buddy Guy’s fine album, “Feels Like Rain,” earlier this week, which contains the song, “She’s a Superstar.” Possibly riffing in a tongue-in-cheek way on “Jesus Christ Superstar,” Mr. Guy sings, “My baby’s a superstar / She’s in a class all by herself... You know if the good Lord made anything better / He must a kept it for Himself.” The next verse is the relevant one: “I was... Talkin’ to a blind man the other night / He said, ‘That woman you talkin’ about, Buddy... Hmm man, what a sight.’”

But on closer inspection, these stories are far from run-of-the-mill miracles stories. For one thing, Jesus’ behavior and words are not exactly what we generally expect from him. There are lessons in this for us. And if we take the time to dig into the first century geopolitical context of these stories, we realize that there are lessons here for us, too. In fact, a comparison of that first century context with our 21st century realities makes these stories seem incredibly contemporary. There is also, as you may have already noticed, some deep connection with two Old Testament passages suggested in the Revised Common Lectionary, which I have combined and adapted this morning for our Call to Worship.

Let’s begin with the story of the Syrophenician woman or actually slightly before that. In the headlong storytelling style of the Gospel according to Mark, Jesus has gone from receiving the tragic news of the execution of his cousin, John the Baptizer, by Herod to the feeding of the five thousand, to walking on water, to healing the sick of the neighborhood of Gennesaret, to defending his disciples’ hygiene to the Pharisees, pretty much without a break. Little wonder, then, that he would choose to remove along with his disciples to somewhere they could talk together in peace, somewhere they wouldn’t be known. To achieve this, Jesus leads his followers into the Gentile region of Tyre on what is now the coast of Lebanon. But even here, word quickly gets out that there is a miracle-worker in town and a local woman shows up begging for healing from her daughter from the beleaguered Galilean.

And Jesus snaps. Look, there are all kinds of ways to put a more graceful spin on this story and I think I’ve read them all. Jesus was testing the woman to see if she was really serious about her faith. Jesus and the woman were engaging in a little good-natured banter. Jesus deliberately used the diminutive form of the word “dogs” to let her know he was teasing. I don’t buy any of it, although I won’t be offended if some of you do. To me, what Jesus does here is just as dismissive and inappropriate as all those modern rappers who insist on calling all women some

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variant of the “b-word.” That is, after all, essentially what Jesus does here. In fact, it would have been even more insulting in the first-century Middle East for people of that time and culture rarely kept dogs as pets. They were regarded as wild, dangerous, and unclean, and if Jesus thought of himself as a shepherd and Israel as his flock, dogs were renowned as enemies of sheep.

This is not just Jesus succumbing due to exhaustion to the ancient tension between Jews and Gentiles. The Tyreans were a special case, listed by the Jewish historian Josephus shortly after the time of Jesus as among the Jews’ bitterest and longest-standing enemies, and Jesus, as a Galilean, would have been especially aware of this. Tyre, built on an island, had to import its produce from Galilee. In times of famine, the wealthy Tyreans were able to buy the bread right off of the tables of their poor Galilean neighbors. The bread of the children, as Jesus noted, was unjustly given to those “dogs” from Tyre. Jesus and his friends could well have made the case that the Tyreans were guilty of the warning of Proverbs: they took the bread of the poor, rather than sharing, taking for themselves because they were rich and the Galileans were poor.

If you think about current politics in the region, you can see that Jesus wouldn’t face a very different situation today. If a nice Jewish boy like Jesus found himself in southern Lebanon today, he would be in the territory controlled by Hezbollah and Hamas. If your family has had to dodge rockets fired at their home, you’re not likely to be very friendly to a member of the family of the one who fired the rocket. You might even call the mother of the family a dog if she asked you for a favor.

But Jesus, fortunately for him, has met his match in yet another of the Bible’s Uppity Women. In current vernacular, this is a mama bear with a sick cub and she’s not taking no for an answer. She’s smart enough not to snap back at him; instead, she’s charming and witty. “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” She’ll wear the title of dog if it gets her what her baby needs. And Jesus, brought up, I maintain, by another of those Uppity Women, is caught.

I am not in the least discomfited by the idea that Jesus had a very human moment of temper. The long tradition of Christianity, after all, teaches us to proclaim that Jesus was fully human. What impresses me in this story, besides the wit of the Syrophoenician woman, is how Jesus makes right what his weakness has set wrong. It is here where I stand in awe and say, along with the centurion, “Surely this man was the Son of God.” Jesus doesn’t alibi. Jesus doesn’t defend himself when it’s been made clear to him that he’s wrong. He simply goes about cleaning up the mess he’s made. He affirms the truth of the woman’s words and grants her request. And, as we will see in the next story, he takes her lesson to heart.

This is one of those stories about Jesus that I believe is meant to say to us, “See, this is how to do it. This is how to live in the world.” First of all, it’s a reminder to us not to found our relationships with those we meet on the circumstances of their birth, their nationality, their race, their religion, their gender, or any other exterior feature of their lives. Jesus dismissed the woman because she was from the *other* race, the *other* nationality, and probably from the *other* socio-economic strata as well. But she made him engage her as an individual; a smart, admirable

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person with a real need he could address. Jesus, frankly, was wrong and she set him right. We should be smart enough to learn from that.

Second, once Jesus had realized that he was wrong, he let it go and went about setting the situation right. Again, he didn't alibi, he didn't defend, he just moved to restore relationship and justice. I can't even count the times I've made a poor decision and then exacerbated it by insisting I was right, anyway. In Jesus' actions here, I find the humility that God calls us all to, as well as the justice and the mercy – this woman's child had done nothing to deserve sickness and Jesus had the power to heal once he got past old wrongs between communities. When we encounter those against whom we have old grudges, or those who belong to a group against we have old grudges, we must remember justice, mercy, and humility.

As Mark continues the story, he relates that Jesus did not turn tale and run directly for home, as one might after being schooled by such a clever adversary, but rather went around the long way to Galilee by making a circle north, then east, then south, overshooting his home region to end up in the Gentile region of Decapolis. Decapolis was a group of ten cities in an area which now is divided between Jordan and Syria. It would be roughly accurate to say that Jesus' route today would take him from Hezbollah to ISIS. But even here, the locals bring him their invalids. This time, Jesus does not protest but heals the deaf man with a speech impediment, although he does ask that the man and his friends not tell anyone.

There is, as I discussed with my colleagues this week, a good deal of ambiguity written into this passage. Mark's hurried Greek style ignores rules about pronouns and antecedents. We can surmise but it's impossible to tell who puts whose fingers into whose ears, who spits and whose tongue is touched. Jesus' actions and utterance of the word "ephphatha" are also ambiguous. He looks up to heaven before he says "Be opened." Is he praying for the heavens to be opened to allow God's power to descend upon himself and the deaf-mute? Is he asking God simply to open the ears and mouth of this other Gentile who has shown faith? Or is Jesus, still smarting from being verbally bested by the Syro-phenician woman, still wary of dealings with "the enemy," asking God to open his own heart, to give him the compassion he needs to feel for this man in order to cure him, to help him to love a people he never thought he'd be called to love? I don't know the answer but, again, I'm not discomfited by the idea that Jesus would need to call on his Heavenly Father for assistance in living up to the ideals that he had taught his disciples. The fully human Jesus appeals to me because he reminds me that we, his very human followers, can also call on God for help to live into God's plan.

All of this makes me wonder, in fact, about Jesus' plea to the man and his friends to keep quiet about the healing. It is in the Gospel according to Mark that we read the most about the "Messianic Secret," the idea that Jesus did not want his identity as God's Anointed One spread broadly so that it would not distract from his teaching or short-circuit his work by forcing him into confrontation with the Romans or the religious leaders. But there may be something else at play here. It is not in Mark but in Luke that Jesus narrowly escapes physical harm in Nazareth when he reminds them of the ways that God has sent blessing to Gentiles even when the Chosen People are suffering. As part of his first sermon in his home town, Jesus sites the healing of Naaman the Syrian by Elisha and the miraculous feeding of the widow of Sidon by Elijah. Now Jesus has healed the child of a woman of Tyre, Sidon's sister city, and healed a man of Syria. Is

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he worried that his actions will provoke an even angrier reaction than his words? Is he saying, in effect, “I don’t want the folks back home to hear about this?”

Sometimes, even when we do the right thing, we don’t want “the folks back home” to know about it. It’s not been very long ago that White Christians in this country would have kept acts of mercy toward Black Christians pretty quiet. And just this week, a Methodist deacon on the ordination track was both defrocked and excommunicated when her superiors learned that she had mercifully blessed the union of two gay men. But the fact is, when we do the right thing and are punished for it, as Jesus tells us, we are blessed. Remember the Sermon on the Mount? “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” And when we stand up for what is right or do what is right despite public opprobrium, we often find that our words and deeds have positive impact that ripples into the future. I think of all those who stood for abolition in the generations before emancipation, of all those who marched with Dr. King before the dismantling of Jim Crow, of those who boycotted South Africa in opposition to apartheid, of those who stood by gay and lesbian brothers and sisters and helped them win equal rights in marriage. Doing the right thing is always the right thing. And, somehow, even when we try to do it in secret, Our Father who sees what is secret knows and helps the word mysteriously spread. Martin Luther said believers should sin boldly. We should do good boldly, too.

We should also, like Jesus, keep praying for openness. We must always remember that we have much to learn, that we can never encompass the wisdom of God or the love of God. It would have been easy for Jesus to beat it home out of Gentile territory or to say to the friends of the deaf-mute man in Syria, “Sorry, I don’t do that.” But Jesus was open to the lesson that God had prepared for him in Tyre and he put his learning to work in Decapolis. Had he not taught his disciples by his example to treat Gentiles as sisters and brothers, the Way of the Nazarene might still be an obscure Jewish sect or it might have vanished from the earth altogether.

Truly, in the words of the Proverb, Jesus of Nazareth was blessed, for he shared his bread, his power to heal and the best of himself, with the poor, with those who were hungry and with those who were sick. To the fearful ones, the sick and those who cared for them, he said, “Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God.” Then the ears of the deaf were unstopped and the tongue of the speechless sang for joy. Jesus still performs these miracles today, among us, through the presence of the Holy Spirit. When we are poor in spirit, downhearted, sick, afraid, Jesus provides us with comfort, with healing, with courage. And now, as the Body of Christ in this place, it is our calling to do the same for others, for the ones that God sends into our paths. We shouldn’t be distracted by their race, their gender, their nationality; they are our brothers and sisters. And we, Good Shepherd Baptist Church, we are on a mission from God. Let us remember the words of Teresa of Avila: “Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.

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Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.”
Thanks be to God. Amen.