

BE STRONG

Our Gospel lesson this morning recounts two of the miracles of Jesus. In this part of Mark we read about a series of miracles that sound as if they occurred one right after the other, but it's unlikely they happened exactly that way. Biblical scholars agree that since Mark was writing about 40 years after the resurrection, it's unlikely he ever met Jesus in person. Tradition tells us he was a follower of the apostle Peter. By this time Peter would have been an old man, retelling stories of his "good old days" – and what days they were!! Mark recognized that these stories were in fact THE story... and gifted them to us by preserving them on paper. So let's hear what he has for us, remembering that the continuity of the plotline is far less important than the content.

In the verses preceding this passage, Jesus and his disciples were probably in his "home town" of Capernaum, in Galilee. Our lesson has them traveling about 30 miles northwest to the region of Tyre, a Gentile city in Phoenicia, on the shore of the Mediterranean. We don't know why he goes there, but from the context it's possible he just wants to get away from the ever-present crowds in Galilee—to enjoy some pressure-free time alone with his closest friends. He enters a house and hopes that his presence there will remain a secret... but this is not to be. His space is about to be invaded.

There are a number of interesting things about the woman who comes to Jesus for help. She lives in Phoenicia but was probably born in Syria—a "Syrophoenician." So Jesus is a foreigner to her. Also, there's a religious barrier. The word in the original manuscript is "Greek," but our text identifies her as a "Gentile," which is probably right—this is more likely a religious label than an indication of her race or origin. Finally, she's a woman, and approaches Jesus directly. Women didn't have much place in the society of the day—they were supposed to be represented by a male relative—and they *certainly* did not go off talking to traveling foreigners on their own.

The story tells us nothing at all about her life story or circumstance—why she's there alone, why no male relative is there to speak for her. We know nothing about her status in society or her economic condition. All we really know beyond this is that she has a sick daughter, she has heard that Jesus is in her city, and she's desperate. And out of her desperation, she finds the strength she needs to overcome religious and societal baggage. She summons all the courage she can muster, sets her fear aside, enters a house where she obviously is not very welcome, and begs Jesus to heal her daughter—cast out the evil spirit afflicting her.

But Jesus refuses her request, apparently on religious grounds, and insults her in the process: "it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Scholars tend to agree that the "children" he refers to are the children of Israel. Remember, this whole

ministry is characterized as “the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.”¹

Most everyone agrees that Jesus’ response is cutting: there are differences between first century Palestine and twenty-first century America, but calling a woman and her daughter “dogs”... that’s harsh in any society. However, I suspect this dialogue has a deeper purpose. Jesus knows this mother’s heart—he knows she’s strong... up for a challenge... and he’s prepared to let her convince him. And so she does. Mothers are like that.

Not to be deterred, she respectfully argues—in fact, she turns his words back on him: “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” Think about that—her response to Jesus indicates her trust that even the leftovers that fall from the table to the floor are enough. God’s grace in Christ is so abundant that there’s enough for everyone, with leftovers to spare. And her persistence and cleverness are effective. Jesus assures her: “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.”

I find this next bit interesting—she goes, and finds that her daughter is healed. She doesn’t ask for proof right then and there... she doesn’t beg him to go with her... lay hands on her daughter... spend additional time or effort—she simply *trusts* that his word is good, and goes home to learn that her faith was justified.

Instead of mere crumbs from the table, she has received the full measure of God’s abundant grace. Her daughter has been not merely cured; she has been, for all intents and purposes, reborn. No longer will she be society’s outcast, but instead she can have a full and productive life, unencumbered by the soul-sickness that had afflicted her.

Our next story takes place in the region of the Decapolis—a federation of Greek cities in Palestine, south and east of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus got there by way of Sidon, 25 miles in the opposite direction. In other words, he took what one of my resources describes as a “geographically improbable” path, easily a hundred miles or more, assuming these two stories really did happen sequentially. For Mark, the exact timeline or map profile is probably less important than the fact that Jesus has chosen to continue traveling among the Gentiles rather than returning to the familiarity of Galilee.

The Gospel says: “They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him.” The fact that the man can speak at all indicates he was probably not deaf from birth, but had become deaf some time ago. It matters little—what does matter is that his friends care enough to bring him to Jesus and ask for a traditional Jewish healing practice—the laying on of hands.

This story is shorter and somewhat less dramatic. There’s no great conflict here—Jesus seems quite willing to fulfill the request. The only real drama arises in his desire to keep his ministry a secret. And unlike the previous story where the girl was healed from a distance, this time we see an unusual amount of contact—Jesus takes the man away in

private, puts fingers in his ears and spittle on his tongue and with a sigh and a word—“Ephphatha”—he heals him. This isn’t a show for the masses; it’s a personal thing.

“Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it.” How ironic... this man and his friends have the most important story of their *lives* to tell, and have just been ordered to say *nothing!!*

Having been touched... healed... having had ears opened up and tongue untied... or for that matter, having just witnessed it – how could they NOT tell the story? They have seen God’s abundant grace; they are “astounded beyond measure” – and they need to tell the story.

So, despite Jesus’ protestations, they proclaim it even “more zealously.” And in their proclamations of joy, they echo our passage from Isaiah: “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.”

Ponder this for a moment or two: if Jesus came to heal you today... in this moment laid his hands on you and sighed deeply and spoke “Ephphatha” on your behalf... what would be opened? What kind of healing would he give?

Now ask yourself:

What am I doing to prepare for such a miracle?

Am I studying God’s word so that I may be confident...

Am I praying, so that I can be sure my heart is in the right place...

Am I persistent in that prayer, even when there seems to be no response, or when that response seems to be “No!”...

Do I truly *want* to be cured of my affliction—am I really hoping for the touch of Christ in a way such as this?

We may not always see healing in the physical sense as we have heard about today, and we may not always experience healing in the way we expect. But in faith we know that our Lord stands ready to heal what truly ails us.

Some of us are still waiting for healing... and some don’t even recognize there is a need. But all of us have experienced God’s healing touch in some way—the proof is our very presence in this place. Knowing what God has done, we too, should be astounded beyond measure at the abundance of grace our Savior offers and ready to proclaim the gospel zealously!

Remember, Jesus has no earthly body but us, the church. No voice but our voices, no hands but our hands. We are the body of Christ in this world at this time, and we have been healed of the spiritual darkness that comes of not knowing Jesus.

So, having been healed, are you passing it on? Are you ready to be this touch for someone else...?

Will Bush Hill Presbyterian Church be fearful and weak-hearted in its proclamation of God's abundant grace? Will you shrink from reaching out to others, even in situations that are foreign... difficult... challenging? Surely not. You know better. You have nothing to fear. You have every reason to be strong.

So be it. Amen.

¹ Romans 1:16b.