



May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O God who listens humbly and acts boldly....Amen

Our gospel reading today contains two stories of healing: one of a daughter of a Syrophenician mother and one of a deaf man in the region of the Decapolis. These stories take place back to back in Mark’s gospel and occur immediately after the story we heard from last week. If we can remember from last week, Jesus was in the region of Gennesaret, speaking to Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem about cleanliness and Jewish traditions regarding purity laws. In that story, Jesus declared, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.”

Then Jesus sets out and goes away to the region of Tyre. I love the gospel of Mark for its brevity and also its sense of movement...and immediately Jesus does this or goes there. But today, I would like us to slow this part of the gospel of Mark down a little bit, moving slowly through this next story, and put it into some geographical and cultural context. Jesus had been near the Sea of Galilee in Gennesaret. The next thing we hear is that he sets out to the region of Tyre. Before this story, Jesus had mostly been spending his time preaching and teaching and healing with Jewish audiences and religious authorities.

Now he goes on what would have likely been at least an eleven or twelve hour hike northward to the region around Tyre, a large Phoenician seaport whose main temples were dedicated to Greek gods. Jesus had intentionally traveled into the middle of a Gentile region. Our passage says that he went away to this region and entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there.

Why did Jesus go there? Was he tired and looking for respite from preaching and teaching and healing? Was he worried about his popularity, trying to get out of the public eye for a while? And which disciples had traveled with Jesus? Who was with him? We are not given any of these details, but we are told that Jesus did not want anyone to know that he was there. And yet? He could not escape notice.

A Syrophenician woman, a Gentile, finds him. She somehow heard about Jesus and believed he could heal her little daughter. Culturally, an unrelated woman, and especially a Gentile woman, would never have approached a Jewish man. In Jesus’ time, women were of very low status, and THIS woman would have been marginalized not only for being a woman, but also a Syrophenician woman whose daughter was demon-possessed. All of these layers only added shame onto her in a society that was ordered by honor and shame.

She would have definitely been considered unclean, and so for her to approach Jesus would have been considered extremely inappropriate. Yet, here she is, bowing down at Jesus’ feet, begging for help. The next part of the story is what makes many of us squirm in our seats when we hear it. Jesus’ initial response to the woman is unexpected, callous, and confusing.

- Jesus, who has already cast out many demons from a variety of people; Jesus, who has been generous, feeding the multitudes that followed him; Jesus, who seems to have a special compassion for restoring those on the margins; Jesus, who we just heard challenge purity traditions in order to move people toward the God’s kingdom of compassion and justice; Jesus, who has never in this gospel of

Mark refused a plea such as this mother’s; this Jesus calls the woman and her little daughter “dogs.” This response from Jesus is shocking. It suggests that the Israelite people are given priority and that everyone else is going to have to wait.

Jesus’ initial response is the focus of many commentators, all trying to hypothesize why Jesus would respond in THIS way to this pleading mother, because this doesn’t sound like a response that the compassionate Jesus we all know and love would give. Is his human side of Jesus getting the better of him? Is Jesus cranky from being overworked? Is he racist? Didn’t his recent lecture on cleanliness indicate that this woman’s societal uncleanliness would not be counted against her? Was Jesus simply giving a response that would have been typical in his time? Maybe this was his divine side, working to create a scenario that would result in a teaching moment for his disciples and the household observing this interaction? I will be honest with you and tell you that I am not convinced of any one of these explanations; and I am not going to spend the rest of this sermon trying to convince you of any particular one either.

What I would like to focus on is what comes next. The Syrophenician mom gathers her courage. She will not be dismissed so easily and she boldly, yet respectfully, responds to Jesus with wit and resilience. *Yes, Lord, and yet, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.* Can one brave voice lead the way? Sometimes one strong voice is just what is needed.

One of my daughter Maeve’s favorite books is [Lola Out Loud: Inspired by the Childhood of Activist Dolores Huerta](#) by author Jennifer Torres. This imagined story tells of a little girl who was very busy and very chatty. In fact, she talked so much that her grandfather nicknamed her “Lolita Siete Lenguas,” little Lola with seven tongues all fighting to be heard. This children’s book culminates with Lola noticing a mother and her daughter who need help, and she uses all of her “seven tongues” to get the attention of her mother and all of her mother’s hotel guests to call the mother and daughter inside for a meal and temporary housing.

In real life, we know that Dolores Huerta used her bold voice to fight for the rights of farmworkers and other marginalized peoples. When asked if she had ever felt unsure of herself, Dolores replied, *“Of course, I’ve been afraid about everything until I did it. I started out every time not knowing what I was to do and scared to death.”* I wonder if this is how the Syrophenician mom felt, not knowing how to respond, scared to death, but boldly proclaiming, “Yes, Lord, and yet...” And what did Jesus do?

First, Jesus listened. He could have turned and walked away, but he stayed and he listened. He didn’t just listen to her take a turn in a debate, but he poised himself to listen deeply, to listen with a spirit of openness. He listened viscerally. And from that place of divine humility, Jesus responded, first with words and then with actions. First, Jesus responds directly to the Syrophenician mother, saying, *“On account of what you said, go, the demon has left your daughter.”*

Then Jesus acts, he immediately heals her daughter, but then he is off and out and about again. The story continues with him going by way of Sidon toward the Sea of Galilee, which is like saying he went from Houston to Tomball, encountered this mother, and then returned to Houston by way of Conroe. Basically, he went all around, through, and within a Gentile region where we then hear the story of the healing of the deaf man with the speech impediment, and then after that the gospel of Mark tells of a second feeding of the multitudes where a scarcity of

loaves and fish again led to abundant nourishment of thousands with many baskets left over.

The Syrophenician mother’s speaking up brought liberation and restoration, healing and comfort, not only to her daughter, but farther out into the Gentile world. God’s household doors were opened wide, no, more like they were thrown off, so that God’s kin-dom became limitless. Sometimes one strong voice is just what is needed. One brave voice led the way, and Jesus, whether he was grumpy or merely teaching, listened deeply and then shifted his ministry focus to the most marginalized in his society. Because of her words, THE Word was called into action. A mother was heard; a child was healed; and the world was never the same again. This uncomfortable story of Jesus and the Syrophenician mother is part of our own birth story; and Beloved Community, we are called by it to listen deeply and to act.

We claim this story as part of our own mission statement: Christ the King Evangelical Lutheran Church is a welcoming and inclusive community nourished by Christ in vibrant worship and committed to God’s mission of love and service, especially to the oppressed and needy. Can we strive to live this out? In the words of Dolores Huerta: *Si, se puede....Yes, we can!*

Or, in the words of Indian-Canadian poet Rupi Kaur:

*if you have never
stood with the oppressed
there is still time*

We have many upcoming opportunities for listening, for speaking up, and for acting. Justice advocacy in the form of letter-writing is taking place in the courtyard today. The following Sunday we will offer Harris County Voter Registration. In October, you and I can listen and learn about immigration with St. James Family Life Center’s Immigration Forum. We can increase our capacity to communicate in Spanish by starting Spanish classes right here in two weeks on Monday evenings. You and I can act through service at the Houston Food Bank next Saturday. Join our spiritual home in its commitment to God’s mission of love and service, especially to the oppressed and needy.

God’s abundant grace is poured out through Jesus’ divine humility, in his life, in his death on the cross, and in his glorious resurrection for you and for me. This grace frees us to be the brave voice needed in our world today. Martin Luther described this freedom as “*a living, daring, confidence in God’s grace.*” And he described a response to God’s grace in this way: “*Oh, it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good things unceasingly.*”

May we listen deeply like Jesus

May we unceasingly do good things

And may we act with bold humility in service and with love toward those most marginalized in our neighborhoods.

Let it be so! Amen!!