

God shows no partiality. Everyone who brings her or his need to Jesus is received with equal honor as a child and heir.

He is open ... we, too, are called to be open ... to listen, to hear, and to serve.

Why was Jesus hesitant to heal the Syrophenician's daughter?

How do we explain Jesus' behavior in the gospel reading? And what does Jesus' behavior in this reading tell us about God?

The woman who approaches Jesus breaks through every traditional barrier that should prevent her from doing so. She is "a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin" (Mark 7:26). In other words, she is implicitly impure, one who lives outside of the land of Israel and outside of the law of Moses, a descendant of the ancient enemies of Israel. She is also a woman, unaccompanied by a husband or male relative, who initiates a conversation with a strange man -- another taboo transgressed.

Her daughter is possessed by a demon.

This woman is an outsider. And what is more, Jesus actually has the nerve to say as much to her face. When the woman falls at his feet and begs him to heal her daughter, 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). The "children" in this statement are the children of Israel, the "little dogs" (*kunaria*) are understood to be all other peoples.

Jesus' response is harsh. How could he say such a thing? Some interpreters propose that Jesus is testing the woman to tease out her affirmation of faith. Others propose that here we see the very human side of Jesus, exhausted and needing a break, **OR** perhaps not yet understanding the scope of his own mission.

Is Mark's Jesus still figuring some things out?

Perhaps! Just maybe ... with the help of a Syrophenician mother, Jesus figures out that his mission is bigger than even he thought it was. When it comes to God's compassion, remember, even Israel's age-old enemies were counted among God's favorites.

Mark, then, reports that Jesus went away to the region of Tyre, entered a house, and did not want anyone to know he was there. Mark tells us that, after feeding the multitude and walking on water, when Jesus got out of the



boat “people at once recognized him, and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed” (6:54-56). Jesus goes to Tyre to get off stage, escape the crowds, and take a break.

“Yet he could not escape notice” (7:24). And the Syrophoenician mother’s trust, tenacity, and unflappable response to Jesus’ insult persuade Jesus that he is not off-duty just because he is in the region of Israel’s enemies. As proof that he is persuaded of this, Jesus relents to the pleading mother,

*Ephphatha*. A deaf man was brought to Jesus, and he does not hesitate to heal him. Just prior to that healing, Jesus had hesitated when a Gentile woman of Syrophoenician origin comes on her own, bows down at his feet, and begs for healing for her daughter. Jesus not only hesitates but says words to this woman many scholars consider an insult: “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Jesus did not look up to heaven before he utters words to this pleading mother that seem both harsh and dismissive.

From Tyre, Jesus heads off to the region of the Decapolis, also gentile territory. Perhaps he is still seeking to escape notice and to rest a bit, or perhaps he has a new vision of his mission beyond the borders of his home territory. In any case, once again escaping notice proves impossible. “They brought to him a deaf man who also had an impediment in his speech, and they begged him to lay his hand on him” (Mark 7:32).

Like the Syrophoenician woman, this man too is an outsider. He is cut off from the world by his inability to hear and communicate with others. This time Jesus does not hesitate to respond to a desperate request, though he does take the man aside, away from the crowd. In a very earthy scene, Jesus puts his fingers in the man’s ears, spits, and touches the man’s tongue, and then says “Ephphatha!” which in Aramaic means, “Be opened!” Immediately, the narrator tells us, “the man’s ears were opened and his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly” (Mark 7:35). Suddenly this man is able to hear and communicate with those around him. Not only is he physically healed, he is also restored to his community.



What is opened?

*Ephphatha*. This one Aramaic word, meaning “be opened,” might be the most significant word in today’s gospel text. “Be opened.” Jesus utters this one word to a deaf man, and he is healed. Jesus says this word after “looking up to heaven,”

then Jesus opens the ears and frees the tongue of a man in the region of the Decapolis—a sign that these “foreigners” can hear and proclaim the good news of Jesus, which they do.

Jesus was open to listening, hearing and healing.

When this tenacious mother comes back at him with her clever response, “Sir, even the little dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs” (Mark 7:28), Jesus can only agree. “For saying that, you may go, Jesus says. The demon has left your daughter” (Mark 7:29). Jesus can only agree that God’s love and healing power know no ethnic, political, or social boundaries. “So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone” (Mark 7:30).

*Ephphatha*. Jesus’ own ears were opened, and he chose a different response to the woman’s request. Her daughter was healed; the demon was gone. Jesus went on his way—HE was *changed*. *Jesus models for us what it means to stand corrected, to face our own deafness, our short-sightedness, be opened, and to change.*

Be open. Ephphatha.

The Christian life is to be opened to respond to the needs of others. But “be opened” is not for the ears only. The call of God, modeled by Jesus, is an opening of ears, eyes, hearts, and hands to serve others with holy compassion and respect.

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The ELCA’s tagline, “God’s work. Our hands,” is fitting here.

None of this work is done by ourselves alone. Our call to action is rooted in what God has already done for us through Jesus Christ. Our call is to respond and be opened to hear, see, and care about the lives of others. This is *ephphatha*—imploring God to help us, that we might be opened to rise to God’s call in our lives.

From James: “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your



fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.”

We don't have to look far in our world to be overwhelmed by divisions, hatred, and tremendous needs nearby and across oceans. The oceans that divide people appear to be getting wider and deeper. Perhaps we hesitate to get involved, or shy away from responding to the needs of others with faith active in deeds of love and mercy. On the most difficult days, indeed every day, we need to look up to heaven and ask for God's divine help in opening our ears, eyes, and hearts to the needs of those around us. And we open our hands to serve, as well.

The epistle reading from James invites us to consider what the influence money has in our congregations. Does it indicate that we are persuaded that Jesus's mission and God's compassion are bigger than we thought. “My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?” (2:1).

For those of us who are used to having a place at the table, perhaps we need to be reminded that none of us has any right or privilege whatsoever to claim with God. We all come as beggars to the table, and it is solely by God's grace that we are fed. Perhaps we need also to be reminded that God's table is immeasurably larger than we can imagine.

For those who identify more easily with the Syrophenician woman begging for crumbs, it must be said that Jesus does not leave any of us in a state of beggarliness. He seats us at the table and claims us as God's beloved children -- children from every tribe and language and nation. Even crumbs from the table would be enough for our healing and salvation. But Jesus has given more than enough. He sets an abundant, life-giving feast for all.

