

On the Inactive List

Mark 7:24-37

²⁴ From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, ²⁵ but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. ²⁶ Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷ He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." ²⁸ But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." ²⁹ Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." ³⁰ So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

³¹ Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. ³² They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. ³³ He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. ³⁴ Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." ³⁵ And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. ³⁶ Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. ³⁷ They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."

This church year we have followed Mark's letter to the first century church. Mark tells us that Jesus had been busy doing his ministry since his baptism and temptation by Satan in the wilderness. Jesus had:

- Called his early disciples and instructed them in the ways of the reign of God;
- Had preached in Galilee – told them “the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news.”
- Had taught with great authority and healed the sick that came into his path:
 - A man with an unclean spirit,
 - Simon's mother-in-law,
 - Many with various diseases,
 - Those with mental illness,
 - A man with a skin disease,
 - One who was paralyzed (we remember the one brought by his four friends),

- A man with a shriveled hand,
- The demon-possessed man who lived in the tombs,
- Had called a tax collector named Levi to follow him and been criticized for eating with “sinners and tax collectors.”
- Had been accused of being demon-possessed himself,
- Had been questioned about following the traditions of the elders in relation to fasting, prayer, doing activities considered work on the Sabbath, and the hand-washing practices of him and his disciples,
- Large Jewish crowds from Galilee, Judea, and other parts were following him because of his healing and teaching ministries,
- When his mother and brothers heard about his non-stop schedule they became concerned and tried to get him to come home for a break,
- He began telling agricultural and domestic parables to explain what kingdom living was about. There was the parable of the sower, the parable of the lamp, and the parable of the mustard seed.
- Then his miracles of calming the storm; healing the woman who hemorrhaged for 12 years, and raising a 12-year-old girl who died,
- He was rejected in his hometown,
- He sent his 12 disciples out on a mission trip to preach and heal,
- He heard the report of John the Baptist’s death,
- He fed the five thousand,
- He walked on the water,
- He taught about what makes us clean or common.

Jesus had been busy, non-stop activities, and he finally decided to take a vacation! He left the usual area of his ministry: Judea and Galilee, and went to the vicinity of Tyre. He was on vacation – he put himself and his disciples on the inactive list. They went to

relax. They left the crowds behind. He put aside his usual agenda and healing, and they looked forward to some down time. He was no longer pressed by crowds – he was not stepping over sick people who were brought to him to touch; no hungry crowds. No, he was just hoping for some peace, quiet and relaxation from the work of non-stop ministry! He was on the inactive list! Right? Wrong! There was still ministry and people in need.

The Syrophenician woman had everything going against her when she pushed her way into Jesus' presence. She was a woman and a Gentile from the wrong side of the tracks. She had no right to engage Jesus in conversation, vacation or not. It would be like imagining a homeless person interrupting the vacation or dinner of the president of the United States to ask a favor.

Despite the dictates of custom, this woman did approach Jesus. She was driven by something more powerful than protocol; she was desperately afraid for her daughter's life. She bowed before Jesus and begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. We expect our kind, loving Jesus to say, "Of course I will save your daughter." Rather, he said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs" (vv. 26, 27). Jesus told this desperate woman that his mission was for the Jews and the Jews alone. It even sounded like he used a racial slur and called her a dog.

Many who suffered those words might have crept away, feeling small and insignificant, but not the Syrophenician woman. She boldly responded, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs" (v. 28). Jesus instantly understood her challenge. His mission was not restricted to the Jews. God's love expands beyond all barriers. Rather than scolding her for her brashness, Jesus told her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter" (v. 29).

If the encounter with the Syrophenician woman was not enough, immediately after returning from vacation, a deaf man with a speech impediment was brought before Jesus. The people begged Jesus to lay hands on the man and heal him. Being deaf in the first

century was not merely about not hearing or speaking clearly. For many people, physical impairment was viewed as the consequence of sin. People who suffered from blindness, deafness, or withered limbs had little or no status. They were often barred from the social and religious institutions of the day. In those days, people were afraid of physical differences and did not understand the biology of birth defects as we do today. When Jesus healed people, he not only corrected their physical problems. He also restored them to community.

Jesus saw beyond this man's infirmity. He saw his value as a child of God. Jesus took the man away from the crowd and put his fingers in his ears, then spat and touched the man's tongue. Raising his eyes to heaven, Jesus said, "Be opened" (vv. 33, 34). Immediately, the deaf man could hear and spoke clearly. Jesus had not only released him from the bondage of his affliction but had reunited him with his community as well. Whenever Jesus healed, whether it was a demon-possessed girl, a man with leprosy, a bleeding woman, or a deaf man, he healed not only the body but the fracture with community as well.

Human beings suffer from a deep insecurity that pushes us to create rules that give status and value to some while denigrating others. In the first-century, the poor, the infirm, the orphaned, the mentally ill, the alien, and many women lived with very low status. Years of lying on psychiatrists' couches and reading Freud have not seemed to dim our insecurities. In the twenty-first century, many of these people still live at the margins of society. We are no more inclined to forgiveness, preferring long prison terms and harsh religious judgment for those who stray from our secular laws or religious morals. There continues to be a sense that if people end up homeless or on drugs, they are weak and at fault. Our world teaches us to shun the dirty, smelly woman ranting on the street or at the bus stop next to us and definitely not to embrace her. Countless children spend empty, abused lives shuttled from one foster home to the next, forgotten and unloved by

the world. Prisoners of other countries and religions can be blindfolded and humiliated because they are deemed undeserving of the same rights and privileges as those in power.

The Syrophenician woman called Jesus to a mission of infinite compassion and mercy. New Testament scholar Mitzi Minor writes that Mark gives us God's initiatives in these stories. Jesus' actions illustrated that a "worthless, Gentile girl whose mind was devoured by a demon" and a "good for nothing deaf man who couldn't even speak clearly" were indeed children of God to be embraced and valued. Humanity's authentic response to God's initiative "calls forth recognition that there are no external barriers between God and any human being: not race, class, ethnicity, gender, age, or physical condition. Consequently, there should also be no such barriers between human beings."

Perhaps it is too much to ask that a homeless person could interrupt the dinner or vacation of the president of the United States to ask a favor, but it is not too much to ask humanity to recognize that there are no walls made of withered hands, deaf ears, or troubled minds separating us from God or us from each other. Status is a product of our own imaginations, invisible to God. Once we acknowledge that there are no walls separating us, love and mercy flow unfettered, and all people are deemed equally valuable. **Amy C. Howe**

I remember going on vacation with our family, including my brother-in-law, Rev. J. Thomas Johnson, whom many of you know. He was not wise like Jesus, who left the crowds behind. Rev. Johnson actually invited the members of his congregation to go with him. So he continued to hear the concerns of the members. My girlfriend, Michele Fairfax Hardwick and her husband Marshall had come with us from Detroit. Like the woman in our scripture, Michele needed to talk to the preacher. J. Thomas, like Jesus, stopped and had the conversation, meeting her pastoral need, even though he was far from home and was on vacation. As Christians, we are never really off-duty. We are never on the inactive list – our job is always to show God's love to everyone we meet!

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