

Mark 7:24 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.

Mark 7:31 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.”

FOREST AND TREES

There is an old saying, “You can’t see the forest for the trees.” In other words sometimes we don’t understand something because we’re not looking at the big picture.

Quite often that’s true in our study of Scripture. We study isolated tidbits of Scripture each week, and fail to see the larger pattern. Unfortunately, this often causes us to read into Scripture what we want to hear instead of letting the Scripture speak to us.

THE OPEN SECRET

Today’s passage is an excellent example of that problem. Read in isolation today’s lesson seems puzzling and even problematical. But, when we “let Scripture interpret Scripture,” as the Reformers put it; this text speaks to us in a more helpful way.

In the Gospel of Mark there is a very important and persistent theme; it is something called the Messianic Secret. In the first half of Mark’s gospel when Jesus heals people they are often told, “Don’t tell anyone what I’ve done.” When the disciples see Jesus in all his glory on the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus tells them, “Don’t tell anyone what you’ve seen.”

But, of course it never works that way. If you tell someone, “I have something to tell you in confidence” sometimes they seem to interpret that to mean that they should spread the word far

and wide! The same thing happened with Jesus. And so Jesus became widely known as a worker of miracles.

THE WRONG CONCLUSION

The reason Jesus wanted to keep his miracles a secret is that the people invariably drew the wrong conclusion. Acts of power and demonstrations of glory might be exciting. But, what do they mean? For Jesus this was the more important point.

And quite often that point was lost on the disciples and the crowds. They wanted to be fed and healed. They wanted a change in their government.

But, they had no spiritual thirst or hunger. They had no vision of a kingdom that stretched beyond their own Promised Land.

I must say that we have a lot in common with those who first misunderstood Jesus. Religion is big business in this country. The bookstores are filled with “sanctified” self-help books and DVDs.

“Have your best life now,” one author famously proclaims. For a long time now religion has been used by politicians as a way of bolstering their arguments on various issues. They say in effect, “If you don’t agree with me you’re not only un-American, you’re un-Christian.”

But, the miracles of Jesus are about more than just the healing of one person, and the glory of the Lord is greater than any earthly kingdom, including our own beloved Promised Land. And that’s the larger message of our lesson for today.

FEEDING OF THE 5,000

Let’s pull back the lens of our focus and look at the bigger picture. In the sixth Chapter of Mark we read about the feeding of the 5,000. Most of you know the story. With only five loaves and two fish Jesus miraculously feeds everyone and even has twelve baskets full of food left over.

What did that miracle mean? It was a sign of God’s coming kingdom.

Just as God fed his people in the wilderness, God was feeding his people again. But, now the agent of that salvation was Jesus. Jesus was the bread of life.

On the night before his death, he makes that perfectly clear. He takes the loaf and says, “This is my body which is broken for you.”

This was no mere picnic in the countryside. It was a sign that God was among his chosen people and was working in a new way. But, no one understood and that included those who were closest to Jesus.

THE STORM

In the next story the disciples are on the stormy waters alone. Jesus walks on the water and stills the storm.

The disciples do not understand. The Bible tells us that they are completely flabbergasted because “they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened.”

UNCLEAN ON THE INSIDE

In the next story in the seventh chapter of Mark, the story that precedes our lessons for today, we learn that the disciples were not the only ones who had hard hearts. The religious leaders had hard hearts as well.

Jesus criticizes the Pharisees roundly for their hypocrisy. These religious leaders are fastidious about observing their religious traditions. They ritualistically wash their hands and make sure that everything they eat is kosher. But, though they are clean on the outside they are unclean on the inside.

Jesus gives an example. The Bible tells us that we should “honor our father and mother.” That means that we should take care of them in their old age.

But, these religious leaders found a way around this commandment. It was a religious deferred giving plan. They said if a person dedicated everything that they had to God then they weren't required to take care of mom and dad. Paying for the parent's upkeep would be stealing from God.

But of course since God didn't have need of his money right now they could use it as they wished. Piety had been used as an excuse for selfishness and down right thievery.

Again, this is nothing new. I have met many pious crooks in my time, and too many of them have been religious leaders.

CROSSING THE BORDER

So, perhaps out of frustration or a need to “recharge his batteries” as we might say, Jesus decides to leave town. Not only does Jesus leave that town; he leaves the country. Jesus crosses the Sea of Galilee and travels to the vicinity of Tyre. Jesus leaves the Promised Land to enter pagan, Gentile country.

The Jews weren't on good terms with their neighbors to the north, and initially it doesn't seem like Jesus is interested in anything more than some rest and relaxation at the local bed and breakfast. The Scripture tells us he "entered a house and did not want anyone to know it."

But, by this time Jesus' reputation preceded him. Some of the people who had seen his previous miracles lived in the vicinity of Tyre and they told some more people. And the word came to a desperate woman. Her daughter was possessed by an evil spirit.

This woman was definitely not kosher. She was a pagan Gentile. And remember that in those days women didn't speak to men in public, at least nice women didn't do that. And no self-respecting rabbi would ever want to be touched by a pagan woman.

And yet that's exactly what happens. This desperate woman comes and falls at Jesus' feet. She doesn't know who Jesus is or what his kingdom is about. All she knows is that he is rumored to have the power to heal her daughter.

So, she throws caution and social custom to the wind and falls at Jesus' feet. And she begs Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter.

BREAD AND DOGS

Now this is where the story gets interesting. Jesus tells this desperate woman, "It's not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs." In other words Jesus seems to be repeating the party line, "I'm here on vacation. Salvation stops at the border. Salvation is only for those who live in the Promised Land."

In the Greek the word translated "dogs" really is the word for "puppies" or small house dogs. We really don't know if they had house pets in those days like we do today. Some commentators seem to think that this distinction doesn't make any difference.

But, others suggest that it makes all the difference in the world.

Rabbis loved verbal fencing matches, and they used them as a way to teach a lesson to those standing around them. Jesus was using this woman's need as a way to teach a lesson about the nature of God's grace

William Barclay writes that when Jesus talks to the woman in this way he is doing it with a twinkle in his eye. Jesus repeats the party line about outsiders but does it in such a way that the desperate woman is offered an opportunity to respond in faith.

I have come to believe that this is true. Surely there was something in the way Jesus said this that invited hope instead of despair. The woman replied to Jesus, "Yes Lord, the children must

eat first, but the puppies under the table eat the children's crumbs." We never ever feed our dog from the table. But, he always sits near us when we eat because he knows that sometimes a scrap might fall from the table, and he is more than happy to clean up after us.

But, the scraps that fall from the heavenly banquet are more than just a few crumbs. Remember, they had twelve baskets full of food left over after the feeding of the 5,000. The heavenly banquet is no ordinary feast.

That feast goes beyond just one meal or just one people. The grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ spills over the borders of the Promised Land into pagan country. And a desperate woman becomes a woman of faith. Jesus tells her that she can go home. Her prayer is answered. Her child is healed.

FAITH AND DESPERATION

When you travel with Jesus it is hard to know what will happen next. The religious leaders are hypocrites and the disciples are clueless. But, we find faith in the hope of a mother who desperately desires her daughter to be healed.

William Willimon wrote, "Theology is fine. Knowledge of biblical precepts is essential.

But, faith is a matter of someone being desperate enough to reach out, and perceptive enough to reach toward Jesus. Some of you know that deep faith because you have come to Jesus, not for a pleasant discussion of spiritual matters, but because you needed a miracle in the worst sort of way."

And then Willimon writes,

"Maybe the problem with too many of us is that we are fairly well fixed, not too miserable, and certainly not desperate. But, there is something about Jesus that keeps close company with the desperate. The woman doesn't know much about religion. All she can say is, 'Lord help.' And then it happens."

Her dogged determination resulted in a disappearing demon!

What about you? What do you want from Jesus?

What demon has invaded your life or the lives of the ones you love? What do you desire so deeply and desperately that you are willing to throw yourself at the feet of Jesus and ask for it?

It's possible that there may be people here today who are a lot like our desperate woman. They may not have all the right answers when it comes to faith, but they know that they need

something. Our lesson for today suggests that these desperate people are close to the heart of Jesus.

Quite often faith begins in a moment of desperation in a place far from the Promised Land. It may not be the end of the journey with Jesus, but it is the place where the journey begins.

SPIRITUAL GEOGRAPHY

In our lesson for today the journey also continues. Jesus leaves Tyre and goes to neighboring Sidon, He continues down toward the Sea of Galilee and then goes into the region of the Decapolis.

Now if you would just read that in the Bible you wouldn't think much about it.

But, I pointed out to my Bible study group that the route Jesus took was a 300 mile circular detour on foot in the desert. One Bible study member helpfully pointed out that Jesus obviously did have a GPS device. Other commentators suggest that Mark must not have been acquainted with the geography of Palestine.

But, I have a different suggestion. I think that Jesus did this on purpose. Jesus wasn't just taking a vacation on the coast near Tyre. Jesus wasn't just wandering around in the desert because like most men he failed to stop for directions.

The geography in this passage has a spiritual meaning. The salvation of God has crossed the border. Those who were totally deaf to the message of hope can now hear.

THE DEAF HEAR

And of course that's why we have the next miracle story. Jesus heals a man who is deaf and consequently cannot speak very well. Jesus takes the man aside, and heals him. Amazingly the man cannot only hear now he can speak perfectly.

One thing was true on both sides of the border. People can't be quiet about a good miracle. Jesus commands them, "Don't tell anyone." And what do they do? They tell everyone!

4,000 FED

In Mark, chapter eight we read that while Jesus is apparently still in Gentile country another crowd gathers in the wilderness. No doubt they had heard of this miracle worker named Jesus, and many desperate people have come to seek his help.

Jesus had compassion on this crowd of 4,000. They had been with him for three days without anything to eat. So Jesus feeds them with seven loaves and a few small fish. Once again there are big baskets of leftovers.

Some commentators wonder out loud why Mark recorded two stories that are so similar.

The importance of this story lies in where it happens. In Mark, chapter six the bread of God comes to the Jews. In Mark, chapter 8 the bread of God has crossed the border and has come to the Gentiles. The God who is revealed in Jesus Christ is the God who comes to satisfy the hunger of Jew and Gentile alike.

NO EAST OR WEST

Another Bible study member said that when she visited a foreign country a hymn kept playing in her head, "in Christ there is no east or west."

She had it right. In Christ there is no east or west. I say it each time we take the Lord's Supper. "This is the joyful feast of the people of God! People will come from east and west, and from north and south, and sit at table in the kingdom of God."

Fred Craddock, tells the story of a missionary sent to preach the gospel in India near the end of World War II. After many months the time came for a furlough back home.

His church wired him the money to book passage on a steamer but when he got to the port city he discovered a boat load of Jews had just been allowed to land temporarily.

These were the days when European Jews were sailing all over the world literally looking for a place to live, and these particular Jews were now staying in attics and warehouses and basements all over that port city.

It happened to be Christmas, and on Christmas morning, this missionary went to one of the attics where scores of Jews were staying. He walked in and said, "Merry Christmas."

The people looked at him as if he were crazy and responded, "We're Jews
"I know that," said the missionary, " What would you like for Christmas?"

In utter amazement the Jews responded, "Why, we'd like pastries, good pastries like the ones we used to have in Germany."

So the missionary went out and used the money for his ticket home to buy pastries for all the Jews he could find staying in the port.

Of course, then he had to wire home asking for more money to book his passage back to the States. As you might expect, his superiors wired back asking what happened to the money they had already sent.

He wired that he had used it to buy Christmas pastries for some Jews. His superiors wired back, "Why did you do that? They don't even believe in Jesus."

He wired back: "Yes, but I do."

In Jesus God expanded His kingdom considerably. The whole world is now a part of the Promised Land. Grace knows no borders. All of God's children deserve to be healed and fed.

But, it's about more than just food and medicine. It's about the vision that God gives us through Jesus of a greater heavenly kingdom. It's about the power and salvation of God coming to a desperate and deaf people.

It was in his darkest hour that Jesus gave his disciples the greatest symbol of hope ... bread broken and wine poured. As we now know it was a symbol of the fact that his body was broken and his blood was shed for the sins of the world.

In Jesus Christ our demons are defeated and our sins are forgiven. In Jesus Christ we have hope ... not only for this life but also for the life to come.

In Jesus Christ grace crosses all borders and gives a word of hope to all people.

Amen.