

Year B Proper 23 2024 Bursting at the Seams Mark 7 vv24 to 37

Jesus has just finished teaching those around him a valuable lesson – if you touch a sick person, sure, you might get sick but you’re not going to be spiritually sick. It is your thoughts, your feelings and the actions you take because of these thoughts and feelings that may get you into spiritual trouble. It is what is inside our hearts and minds and comes out that defiles a person, Jesus tells everyone. So, from there, we hear today that Jesus has travelled north – way up north, out of his own country and into the country of the Phoenicians. It seems that Jesus wants to get away from the crowds for a while. Maybe he needed a rest. Maybe he wanted to have extended prayer time. We don’t know the reason. We only know that he didn’t want people to notice him. He’s been swarmed by huge crowds of thousands of people, all of them needing him, demanding his attention, his healing, his compassion, his food.

Perhaps you’ve been in that state of mind, too – crowds of people, the noise, the chatter, the need to interact with everyone – it just gets to be too much, you’ve had enough, and you want peace and quiet. Jesus’ peace and quiet is immediately broken. He’s miles away from home. He’s not even in the same country and yet news of him has spread there already. As Professor Matt Skinner says, “The abundance [God’s] kingdom promises has a tendency to burst the seams” (workingpreacher.org). Jesus is revealing God’s kingdom where there is an abundance of food, an abundance of healing, an abundance of joy that just can’t be kept down. This good news has travelled faster than Jesus and a woman knocks on the door before he has a chance to sit down and put his feet up.

This woman, we are told, has a daughter with an unclean spirit. We aren’t given their names but Mark does make sure we know this woman and her daughter are

not Jewish people. The unnamed woman, bowed at Jesus' feet is a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. Having Mark point this out is like us crossing the river and then saying we ran into some Americans. So Mark *really* wants us to know that this woman is not Jewish.

Non-Jewish people, not following those purity laws we heard about last week, were – of course – considered spiritually unclean. Most Jewish people avoided non-Jewish people whenever they could and yet, Jesus has deliberately travelled into a non-Jewish country. Not only was this woman a spiritually unclean non-Jewish person, she was, according to Jewish history, she was an enemy. There had been a long history of conflict and oppression between the two countries. Also, this woman is by herself...no friends or family advocating for her and daughter. Having a demon-possessed daughter doesn't make for easy social interactions. The daughter's behaviour was likely quite frightening to others and who wants to be around someone possessed by a demon?

Here we have Jesus, just wanting to get away from people, standing in front of this desperate woman – desperate for the healing of her daughter, desperate to become part of her community once more. This woman bowed at Jesus' feet, was spiritually unclean – or so he had been taught by the religious elders. This woman bowed at Jesus' feet was the enemy – or so he'd been taught by the religious elders. This woman was on her own – her own people had turned away from her – but here she was, begging him to heal her daughter. All of these thoughts are passing through Jesus' mind and his response to her is, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." In plain language, Jesus has just said to her, "I'm going to share the good news of God's

arriving kingdom with the Jewish people first, rather than share their good news with your people so, no, no kingdom healing for your daughter.”

We're left thinking, “Wait...what? Kind, compassionate, forgiving Jesus just said ‘no’ to this woman? He’s not going to heal her daughter?” Not only did he say ‘no’, he seriously insulted her. What’s going on here?

Jesus appears to have fallen prey to the prevalent thinking of his people. He seems to be refusing to help this woman simply because she is not Jewish like him, passing judgement based on what’s seen on the outside. This is something every single one of us does. James includes this failing of ours in his letter because he has witnessed his people – good, Christian people – falling prey to this time and time again. We think of others according to how society tells us to think. We make judgements about people based on outward appearances. As in James’ letter, let’s suppose we see two men walk through the door. One is nicely groomed and dressed in a clean, well-pressed three-piece suit while the other man has long, uncombed hair, beard, and his clothes are worn and quite dirty. We get the impression that if get close enough we’d probably smell something unpleasant. Which of these two men is more intelligent? Which man was ambitious and motivated when growing up? If you were single, which man would you want to date? Which man is “successful”? I don’t even need to tell you which man would get all or most of those votes. All of us have built in prejudices that we apply to people based on gender, colour of skin, and our perception of what the person’s social and economic status is.

We all do...and Jesus seems to be doing the same thing – refusing to heal the woman’s daughter simply because they are not Jewish. But is this really the case?

Jesus went into Phoenician territory. He knew he would run into Phoenicians. Jesus knows the Scriptures inside out and backwards. He knows he is the light that lightens the Gentiles – he is this woman’s saviour just as much as he is the saviour for the Jewish people. To top it off, Jesus has just vigorously explained to the Jewish leaders and to his disciples that it is what is in the heart that counts. It is what is on the inside and comes out of us that defiles, he says. What you look like, what you wear, where you come from, how much money you have...do not make you a good person or a bad person, a spiritually clean person or unclean person.

What Jesus does, in the brief exchange with this unnamed woman, is to show us this...to drive home the point to us and to his disciples that the person we judge based on society’s teachings is not who they are based on God’s teachings. In just a few words, we are shown the fierce love of this woman, the strong belief of this woman, the absolute trust of this woman in Jesus to heal her daughter. Jesus recognizes her faith in him and heals her daughter. Just like that...with a word...she is healed and this woman and daughter are welcomed into the wholeness of life in God’s kingdom. No exclusion.

Jesus puts an exclamation point on this teaching by then traveling even deeper into Gentile territory – north to Sidon and then south again into the Decapolis. Not only does he heal again he heals a man who would be considered doubly unclean...this man cannot hear and he does not speak well. As we talked about last week, this man – and the unnamed woman and daughter – would not have been allowed to set foot within the temple to worship God. They were considered unclean and were pushed to the margins. Not only does Jesus heal this man, Jesus touches this man. He put his fingers in the man’s ears and he touches the man’s

tongue. With a flashing neon sign and clanging bells, Jesus is saying it's okay to touch the poor, the sick, the outcast – you won't be spiritually damaged. In fact, Jesus looks up to heaven to make sure we get the message, loud and clear, this is God's will. There is no "except" clause in the command to love God and to love neighbour. We are to push aside and overcome the rules and teachings of a society that does not truly know and understand God's ways. We are to continuously strive to show to the world what Jesus shows to us. In doing this, we live more and more into the fullness of life in God's kingdom. Mark knows this. Mark wraps up his story with the grand announcement: he makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak. Well, that is, for people who know scripture, that is a well-known catch phrase of the kingdom, evidence of the fullness of God's kingdom on earth. When God comes to bring the completeness of his kingdom the deaf will hear and the mute will speak (Is.35.5-6). The people witnessing the healing are understandably super excited – God's power is taking root on the earth, the revelation of God's kingdom is unfolding before their eyes.

They are astounded beyond measure, we hear. Why would Jesus want them to contain their excitement? Why would he want them to keep quiet about what they had seen? They aren't ready. They have very firm ideas about who Jesus should be and what he should do as the obvious Messiah sent by God to make everything right. They were envisioning a Messiah who would operate according to the world's way of power – with wealth, and status, and military might. They weren't ready to accept what Jesus was offering...love, peace, joy...that had absolutely nothing to do with money, social status, and physical strength. They weren't ready. Jesus had much more to teach them and to show them.

That's where we are. We're not ready. We still think of success in terms of the man in the three-piece suit. We still think of success as having a church filled with people and bringing in lots of money. We're working at being ready though. Each time we gather together, we are learning, we are transforming, we are being made ready.

We learn together how God's ways turn the world's ways upside-down to create a world of equality and sharing. The church, Harold Percy writes, "the church is a community of people who are learning to live to the glory of God" (p. 17 of *Your Church Can Thrive*). To live to the glory of God is to live in such a way that we enhance God's reputation in the world. Jesus shows us how it's done: We are to cast aside our prejudices and we are to touch, to heal, to welcome, to share. It's hard work but it's the best work. So let us live to the glory of God.