

At first glance, I find this morning's Gospel a very troubling story. At first glance, it may well do some damage to the picture we have put together of just who Jesus was. That is, if we have it in our mind that Jesus was a kind and compassionate person who moved about the countryside doing good and extending kindness to people who were otherwise rejected by society, then here we must wrestle with an image of Jesus that seems to show him as a bit cold and unfeeling.

Let's run back over the story again. Jesus is up in the northern part of Galilee and he leaves the area. That is, he crosses the border and goes further north into the area of Tyre and Sidon – into land that would have been part of ancient Phoenicia and what would have been Syria in that day. There Jesus encounters a woman who is described as a Syrophenician – a description that indicates she was from Palestine, but was not a Jew. She was a Gentile – with terrible problems. Her daughter was, in the language of the day, “possessed by a demon.”

As in other gospel stories, we do not know what was wrong with the girl, except to say that she was living with some mental or physical handicap. This mother sought out Jesus, which took a great deal of courage. She was a woman, not Jewish, and a sinner, following the accepted assumption of those days that cases of demon possession resulted from the sins of the parents.

This woman asks for help and Jesus makes no answer. She continues to follow and plead her case. The disciples ask Jesus to get rid of her, leading him to say that he was sent to the lost sheep of Israel – implying, therefore, that he was *not* sent to heal Syrophenicians. Still, the woman persists, being bold enough to run in front of Jesus and throw herself down at his feet.

In response to this final plea, Jesus makes a statement that is, frankly, ice-cold. He tells her that it is not right to take bread from children so that it can be thrown to dogs. It is hard to imagine how such an insult could have failed to get rid of this woman, but her love for her child drove her on. She told Jesus that she (like a dog) would be content to lap up the scraps that fell off the children's plates. Jesus lets go of his argument and gives in. He heals her daughter.

Does Jesus as we meet him in this encounter seem like the Jesus that we have pictured all of our lives? Does this sound like the Jesus who said, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God

belongs" (*Mark 13:14*)? Does this sound like the Jesus through whom we come to know God, the Jesus who came to show us the way to quality of life and well-being? Or does this sound like a xenophobic bigot?

This is a difficult story and one that I suspect we have questions about. And yet, we need to stop a moment and take stock of this story. Get underneath what is on the surface and look a little deeper. As I look at it a bit harder, I find myself thinking it was not intended to be a story about Jesus' personality. Although it does perhaps give us a glimpse of the human side of Jesus, I suspect that the *real* point of the story has less to do with how Jesus *behaved* and more to do with the direction of the church's mission.

After Jesus' death, the church's mission was a hot topic. In fact, the first church convention was held to consider the question of whether there would *be* a mission to the Gentiles and if so whether they would have to become Jewish in order to become Christian. It was a difficult question, and in reflecting upon the ministry and example of Jesus, what the early church folks saw was a mission to the house of Israel. Any push for a broader mission – such as the great Commission commanded – was pretty slow in coming and not an easy boundary to cross.

It is with this as cultural context that Mark offers this little isolated incident which is full of honest struggle and turmoil on the part of Jesus. Surely during Jesus' lifetime the question surfaced: should I be going out to other lands as well; are not *all* people to be touched by my work? And it would seem that Jesus resisted the temptation to engage in such a broader ministry.

The story we read as the Gospel today – with all its troubling imagery and language – is a reminder to us that those "outside" the covenant are to be included in our caring – in our loving – in our ministry in the name of Christ, even when sometimes we don't feel like it or our culture puts blinders on us preventing us from seeing clearly our Christian call. If Jesus can wrestle with such matters – and finally end up doing the right thing – perhaps it's OK if we struggle too, provided our struggles land us on the side of reaching out and touching lives.

What difference might this encounter make to us, and to our situation right here, right now in 2018 America? I think a clue might be had in a word Mark's Gospel finds so powerful, he quotes it untranslated from the Aramaic before rendering it in the Greek known to his hearers: *Ephphatha*: be opened. Yes, it was spoken to one Jesus encountered *after* his ministry to the Syrophenician woman – but it is a word we need to open our ears and hear.

Be open. Do not let your preconceptions deafen you to the realities or the people outside your normal orbit. In these polarized times, it is easy to let innate tribalism keep us from getting to know people unlike ourselves. We all fall into this trap. We like people who remind us of ourselves. But when we make the effort to expand our boundaries – to offer the love of Christ to people unlike us – in whatever way these differences present themselves – it has a way of broadening us, giving us greater awareness, growing in us more empathy, more solidarity.

This is a matter for intense prayer. Pray for the trust that leads to openness. Open your hands to receive. Then open your hands again to give. Walk with your arms outstretched, open to embrace the call God places in your heart. Ask God to open your heart to welcome whoever walks across your threshold, to listen to experiences that differ from your own, to learn what others have to teach.

I truly believe Jesus learned something that day from the Syrophenician woman, or perhaps remembered something he had forgotten. She teaches him to embrace his openness and then returns home to a demon-free daughter. Jesus returns home, too, and meets a man who is physically closed off. *Be opened* are his words of healing to that man, who then cannot contain his raucous proclamation. And just as Jesus lived a life of openness to God and to those people whom most never bothered to see, Jesus gives us the same invitation today. *Ephphatha*. Be open.