

MERCY FOR ALL

Mark 7:24-37

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Series B)

September 8, 2024

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Mark*, chapter 7, verses 24 through 37. It's a little bit strange in places, but, in the end, it reveals the expansive mercy of Jesus. Please stand as you are able for the gospel. From Mark 7, beginning at verse 24, we read in Jesus' name.

²⁴ And from there he arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And he entered a house and did not want anyone to know, yet he could not be hidden. ²⁵ But immediately a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit heard of him and came and fell down at his feet. ²⁶ Now the woman was a Gentile, a Syrophenician by birth. And she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷ And he said to her, **“Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.”** ²⁸ But she answered him, “Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” ²⁹ And he said to her, **“For this statement you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter.”** ³⁰ And she went home and found the child lying in bed and the demon gone.

³¹ Then he returned from the region of Tyre and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. ³² And they brought to him a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment, and they begged him to lay his hand on him. ³³ And taking him aside from the crowd privately, he put his fingers into his ears, and after spitting touched his tongue. ³⁴ And looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, **“Ephphatha,”** that is, **“Be opened.”** ³⁵ And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. ³⁶ And Jesus charged them to tell no one. But the more he charged them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. ³⁷ And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, “He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.”

Blessed Lord, You have caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning. Grant that we may so hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them that, by patience and comfort of Your holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

You may be seated.

Salvation is for all people. Jesus has mercy on all who call upon him for help. He is merciful to the Jews. He is merciful to all the people of the nations. He is merciful to those who are well. He is merciful to those who are sick, injured, or disabled. He is merciful those who are successful or seem to have it all together. And he is merciful to those who are poor, sinful, or what we might politely call “troubled.” Jesus is merciful to all who call upon him for help.

In both of these accounts that make up the gospel reading for today, Jesus says and does things that are just strange. And this is kind of normal for Jesus. He often says and does things that, when we stop to think about it, are kind of weird. We might sometimes have a boring

characterization of Jesus in our minds. And I think that just comes from our own sense of what is right and what is wrong. We know that Jesus is a good person. He's the only truly righteous person ever. So we assume that he always says and does what is right. And that, of course, is true. But our sense of right and wrong might not be right. We might think that a good person dresses a certain way, speaks a certain way, and follows certain etiquette. We might think that a good person never raises their voice or offends anyone. They're predictable and, therefore, kind of boring.

But Jesus is none of that. He often says and does things that are just kind of strange. Sometimes he heals people in weird ways. Sometimes he says things that just seem wrong. He often told parables to crowds without telling them what they meant. So his disciples often questioned him. They would ask him why did he certain things. They had to ask him what most of his words mean. And sometimes they even argued with him.

I'm convinced that if Jesus were still present with us in that same local and visible way, he would seem strange to us. Like the twelve did two thousand years ago, we would question why Jesus says and does certain things.

The first thing we read is that Jesus "went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon" (7:24). That, at first, might not seem so strange. We go places, and it's usually not a big deal. But Tyre and Sidon were Gentile cities north of Israel. Jews at that time had no dealings with foreigners. They feared that contact with people from other nations would make them religiously unclean. So the Jews did not want to associate with them. They did not want to be around them. And they certainly did not want to visit their countries. But Jesus did. In fact, both of these healings took place among the Gentiles. The second one, where Jesus healed the mute and deaf man, was "in the region of the Decapolis" (7:31). Decapolis is a Greek name: *deca*, meaning "ten," and *polis*, meaning "city." It was made up, apparently, of ten cities. It was a Gentile area on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus and his disciples spent much of their time on the western side of the sea. That's where Capernaum and other Jewish cities were. But Jesus performed these two healings in Gentile countries, one to the north of Israel, and one to the east. That probably doesn't sound so weird to us, but it would have been strange for a Jew.

In the earlier section of Mark 7, just before these miracles, Jesus was arguing with the Pharisees about Jewish traditions and religious cleanliness. He said that it is not what goes into our bodies, like food, that defiles us, but the sins that flow out of our hearts. And so Jesus declared all foods clean (7:19). That must have been quite a shock to the Jews, who couldn't eat things like bacon or shrimp. Jesus suddenly declared that it was okay. But even more important than God's acceptance of food is God's acceptance of all people. So right after this argument, Jesus goes away into these Gentile countries. The timing is no coincidence. He's demonstrating that he has come to bring healing to all nations.

Again, this might not shock us, because we're used to the fact that there are Christians from every nation of the world. But we might still have our insider-outsider divisions. And this, for us, is probably the most appropriate application when we see Jesus challenge the Jewish prejudice of that time. They saw themselves as being in the Kingdom of God, and everyone else as being outside of it. As Christians, we, of course, see ourselves as being in the Kingdom of God. And this is true. And unbelievers are outside of the Kingdom. But instead of this being a division to maintain, we should desire for them to be in the Kingdom. And the Kingdom is for them. We want to end this division by bringing the good news of forgiveness to all people and welcoming

them into the Kingdom of God, which is to welcome them into our fellowship. We should want to destroy the division between insiders and outsiders.

Some of these outsiders are worshippers of other gods. They are held captive by lies. And in this way, our situation is not that different from that of the Jews two thousand years ago. All the neighboring countries had their own religions. They also worshipped false gods. It wasn't just an ethnic division, but it was primarily religious. But Jesus shows us how he goes to them to free them from the power of darkness.

Others, who might seem like outsiders to us, might be people who aren't religious at all. This doesn't mean they don't have a god. Everyone has a god, with a small "g." It's whatever they fear, love, or trust in above all things. It's just not organized. They have a disorganized religion. They might have a different lifestyle than ours. And this lifestyle might even be sinful. Or they might have what we consider to be a clean lifestyle. By all outward appearances, they might seem like upright and decent people, they just don't worship the one true God. And we might be tempted to see these so-called "clean" people as closer to the Kingdom of God. But they're still outside of the Kingdom. And we should view them all the same: as precious souls that God loves and desires to save.

In the epistle reading today, James speaks of the sin of partiality (2:1-18). He presents the hypothetical situation, though it may not actually be hypothetical, where two men come into the assembly. Think: *worship service*. One man is clean and well-dressed. He seems to be rich too. The other man is obviously poor, and his clothes are all shabby. Both are welcomed, but the first is given more honor. James rebukes this treatment.

You might dress up to come to church. And I think that's a good practice to show reverence for God. And the act of doing so helps to prepare our hearts. It reminds us that we are doing something set apart. But if we look with partiality upon someone who is dressed differently, we sin against them. And it causes great harm to our own souls, because we are forgetting that we come with defiled hearts in need of the mercy of Christ.

Whoever walks into church, and whoever you encounter outside of church, is not so different from you. And they're not so different from one another. There's a little mind exercise I do sometimes when I meet a person. I just remind myself of what is true. *This is a precious human soul created in the image of God, and Jesus shed his blood to redeem them.* That helps me treat them rightly. And I need to remind myself of that, because I am tempted to treat some as more important than others, and I am especially tempted to treat myself as the most important of all.

To have the heart of Jesus means that we would welcome and even seek for outsiders, so that they would also enjoy the blessings of his Kingdom. It's different from how our hearts naturally think. So Jesus might surprise us by how he intentionally goes to outsiders.

The thing that really sticks out as strange, though, in this passage, is the way Jesus speaks to the woman in the first miracle. It seems especially out of character when we recognize that Jesus desires to save all. He seems cold, and even bigoted toward this woman. Her daughter was possessed by a demon. When she learned that Jesus had come to town, she came and begged him to cast it out. But Jesus seems to resist her. He called this woman and her daughter "dogs." This is the sort of thing that might get you cancelled today. He said, **"Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs"** (7:27). That sounds bad. It's really not so difficult to handle, though, unless we want there to be a problem. The solution is simply that Jesus knows how this will end. He loves this woman. And he loves her daughter. That becomes clear in the end. But he wants to get to the end in a particular way, in order to

draw out a response of faith from her. And, ultimately, his actions demonstrate that she and her daughter are not dogs, but precious children of God. Jesus knows what he's doing.

In his initial denial of the woman, Jesus left some crumbs for her to pick up. And she did. Jesus said, **“Let the children be fed first.”** Okay, that implies that there will still be something left for her and her daughter. And Jesus calls them **“dogs.”** Dogs were considered unclean animals to the Jews. So they sometimes referred to their enemies or the Gentiles as **“dogs.”** So Jesus is just repeating the vocabulary that his culture would use. He's testing the woman a little bit to see if she will accept it. And ultimately it works out that he overthrows the prejudice. The specific word Jesus used refers to a small dog. So instead of being a larger wild dog, this was the smaller kind, something someone might have for a house pet. So there's something here for the woman to grasp on to.

The pet dog belongs to the master. I don't have a dog. But I suppose some of you do. A dog is not a person, but if you have a dog, you treat it better than most people, simply because it's your dog. There are eight billion people in the world. But you don't feed them all every day. You don't pet them. You don't play with them. You don't take them for walks. You treat your dog better than you treat eight billion humans, simply because it's *your* dog. By referring to Gentiles as **“dogs”** who will eventually be fed, Jesus hints that they also belong to him. Jesus leaves something here for the woman to grasp.

And she does. She says, **“Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs”** (7:28). This is a marvelous response of faith. In essence, she's saying, *Yes, I'm okay with being a dog, as long as I get to be your dog, because your crumbs are enough for me.* She kind of reminds me of that woman earlier in *The Gospel of Mark* who touched the hem of Jesus' cloak, thinking that if she could just touch his clothes, that would be enough to heal her (5:25-34). They think so highly of Jesus that if they can just get a little bit of him that will be enough. But they don't just get a little bit of him. They get all of him.

Jesus answered, **“For this statement you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter”** (7:29). **“For this statement ...”** She picked up exactly what Jesus intended for her to pick up. She demonstrates a humble faith that thinks so highly of Jesus. He had drawn out the response of faith that would truly benefit this woman in this life and for all eternity.

He healed the girl by the power of his word. This is power. He heals her from a distance, and he knows it. When a doctor heals you, he doesn't really know it immediately. They need follow-up appointments to make sure their treatment is working. But Jesus just says it, and he knows it works. The woman took Jesus at his word. She went home and saw it to be true.

And notice the last thing Jesus said to the woman: **“The demon has left your daughter.”** Now he uses the right vocabulary. He calls her **“daughter.”** Dogs don't have sons and daughters. They have puppies. If there's any thought left in your mind that Jesus might have been a bigot, this should settle it. Initially he called this woman and her daughter dogs so that he could overthrow the prejudice of his culture. He draws out a response of faith in order to honor this woman. He lets her faith show us who she really is. And in the end, through his actions and his words, he treats them as children. God doesn't have dogs. I mean, except for actual dogs. But as far as humans go, he has children. And he desires for all people to call upon Jesus and be saved.

The second miracle drives this home. It's another healing of a Gentile. It's less strange than the first one, but the repetition reinforces the theme. Jesus healed a deaf and mute man. Again, he did it by the power of his word. He touched the man, but that's not how he healed him. He put his fingers in his ears, and he touched his tongue. That's a little strange. We usually don't do that

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to strangers. But Jesus does this as a sign. It's sort of like a sign language to the man of what he's about to do. The man can't hear him ... yet. So he communicates by touching him. It's also a sign to everyone that sees it, that Jesus does not consider this man unclean. He touches a Gentile. It's a sign of acceptance.

Then he heals him by the power of his word. He says, "Ephphatha." That's Aramaic, and it means, "Be opened." The New Testament was written in Greek, but Jesus spoke Aramaic, and there are a few places where the biblical writers preserved the original Aramaic. The primary effect of this is emphasis. These are very significant words. More than just healing this man, it teaches us something. The miracles of Jesus are more than just miracles. They are signs of who he is and what he does. They reveal, of course, that he is the Son of God. And they also reveal the nature of his Kingdom. So when Jesus says, "Be opened," he means more than just this man's ears and mouth. So what else is Jesus opening? He speaks to his heart, "Be opened," so that he would receive the gift of faith. And he speaks to his own kingdom, "Be opened," to receive this Gentile as a child of God.

Salvation is for all people. Jesus has mercy on all who call upon him for salvation. I want you to hear this as it applies to you. And I want you to hear this as it applies to your neighbors. Jesus' Kingdom is open to you, regardless of who you are. It doesn't matter where you're from. It doesn't matter what you have. It doesn't even matter what you've done. Jesus invites you to call upon his Name for salvation. His Father in heaven invites you to confess your sins to him. He promises to hear and forgive, because Jesus has already paid for those sins by his innocent sufferings and death. Jesus' Kingdom is open to you, and he has mercy for you.

And hear this as it applies to your neighbor. If God is merciful to you, and he is, then he is also merciful to your neighbor, and his kingdom is open to them. Jesus is merciful to all who call upon him for salvation. For "Everyone who calls upon the name of the LORD shall be saved" (Joel 2:32; Acts 2:21; Rom. 10:13). Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.