

Mark 7:24-37

Jesus 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, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. 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." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

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

A Time for Change - September 5, 2021

Mark 7:24-37

The start of the new school year is always exciting. The books, pencils, backpacks, laptops. The new clothes and new classrooms. The joy of reuniting with friends and settling back into a predictable routine. This year especially is full of change. We in New Jersey are returning to full in-person instruction after 15 months of hybrid learning. Some have been online all during this time. Some ventured back into the buildings a few hours a day. All students have had a very different educational experience from anything we had growing up. While most students are somewhat behind in their learning compared with previous years, I'm sure they will all catch up over time.

And that's the point of school, isn't it? School is about change. Whether you are just starting your educational journey at a place like Kaleidoscope Kids or an adult enrolling at Camden County Community College, we all go to school in order that we will experience change.

Of course, the primary change that happens in school is one of knowledge. Over time, we learn new things. We may learn that old ideas were wrong and we have to let go of what we thought we knew so something better can take its place. Our skillset changes. Anyone involved with a student this past year undoubtedly gained all kind of skills with computers as we adapted to this new form of learning. Even you watching this service online probably had never heard of Zoom or imagined doing virtual worship 18 months ago. I personally am glad that we are able to offer this alternative experience. It's not the same, of course, as being together live, but we are nonetheless together and in community with each other and that is always a good thing.

But school is more than change in terms of our knowledge and skills. Young people especially miss the interaction with their classmates. School is the place we go to in order to figure out how to navigate this thing called society. Most of us have come to realize that it does not matter how much knowledge you have if you are unable to interact with other human beings. Now I'm not saying all the interactions we have with other students are necessarily good or pleasant or even useful. But life is full of experiences both pleasant and unpleasant and school is where we are exposed to the endless variety of people and situations we are going to be encountering for the rest of our lives. In that way, in-person education is far superior to online instruction.

As human beings we are shaped by our families, our friends and schoolmates, and by the wider society. Such is the way it must be because we enter the world as a blank slate for the world to write

on. Having spent part of my vacation with three babies around 1 year old, I was reminded how much like sponges they are and how quickly they learn to imitate the world around them.

Now I'm going to throw a curve ball at you. Jesus was a sponge, just like the babies I played with last week. Jesus was a human sponge surrounded by his family, his village, and part of the Jewish culture in which he grew up. Some of us may believe that Jesus entered the world from the moment of his birth as being full of knowledge, totally aware of himself, his purpose, and fully mature.

The problem with that view is that if Jesus were born perfect and knowledgeable then he wouldn't be a human being, would he? The definition of being human is that we are all in the process of continuous change, aren't we? We grow, we learn, we absorb, modify, and even dismiss ideas and values from the society around us. We learn how to love: to give love and receive love. We also learn what it like to be rejected and even hated. All this is part of the human experience.

If Jesus were born perfect, having all knowledge and wisdom from the start, then it follows that he would not be able to grow or change or learn. He would not need to. But if Jesus is fully human as we claim he is, then his not growing, not changing, and not learning excludes him from his essential humanity. If Jesus is fully human, then he did learn, he did grow, and he did change over time and today's scripture is a prime example of Jesus changing right before our eyes.

In today's passage, Jesus needed a break. The scripture says that he left Israel and went to a house where he didn't want anyone to know he was there. After all, Jesus had just finished feeding 5000 plus people, he had experienced rejection in his hometown, and he learned that his cousin John the Baptizer had been killed by King Herod. I think he earned a break, don't you? And the fact the Jesus wanted to get away proves that he got tired and needed to regroup, just like all of us do from time to time.

Unfortunately for Jesus, he didn't get the rest he wanted. Apparently even outside of Israel he was too well-known. As soon as he entered what he thought would be his vacation house, a woman burst in and wanted Jesus to drive a demon from her daughter. Now from a societal standpoint, this was totally wrong. In Jesus' time men spoke only to their wives and female family members. Moreover this woman was an outsider. She was not Jewish like Jesus. Jews were not supposed to talk to anyone but other Jews. And so when this woman, this outsider, came to Jesus for help. Jesus replied the way he had been conditioned to do. He refused to help this woman and her sick daughter.

What! Jesus said no! Jesus never says no! He's always helping, always healing, always reaching out to the least, the last, the lost. But yes, friends Jesus said no and he said no in the most racist,

prejudicial way he could. To her face, Jesus called that woman a “dog.” If you think calling someone a dog today is bad, it was far worse back then. The term “dog” was every nasty word rolled into one.

How could Jesus, Son of God, savior of the world, say such a thing? Well over the centuries, commentators have tried to put a nice spin on this passage. They have said Jesus was just faking, he was planning to help the woman all along. Others have toned down the Jesus’ using the word “dog” saying he really was saying, “little puppy.” In other words, regardless of the spin, regular readers and scholarly commentators alike were and are scandalized by what Jesus said.

The choice before us today is whether to believe Jesus was just joking with the woman or that he meant what he said when he called the woman a dog.

Personally, I believe Jesus meant exactly what he said. As a Jewish male, he had been trained all his life to avoid women in general and non-Jews in particular. He was taught this from a young age. Yes, he certainly understood that his mission was to bring a fresh perspective or good news about the Jewish scriptures to the Jewish people. He knew that he had power to heal and transform lives. But it seems he thought his work was limited to those of his own culture and religion.

Jesus, in other words, needed to be taught a lesson, the most important lesson of his life, and this woman, this non-Jew, was about to teach him.

She said that even the dogs get the crumbs from the children’s table. In other words, this woman was bowing before this man, this Jew, and insisting that Jesus was sent for her, too! She claimed her share of the bread of life. She wasn’t just claiming it, she was demanding it!

And Jesus heard her. Yes, Jesus had healed non-Jews in the past, but clearly this encounter with a foreign woman marked a decisive shift in Jesus mind and ministry. Jesus learned and grew from this encounter. She schooled him on what his mission was truly about. Jesus did not come just for the sake of his fellow Jews: Jesus realized that he came for the entire world. Quite a change!

Yet it makes sense, doesn’t it, if we accept that Jesus is fully human? All human beings change, learn, and grow. Now it was Jesus’ turn as a human being to learn: to fully understand, appreciate and embrace his mission. Jesus learned that he had no choice but to help that woman and her daughter and he therefore grew by healing the little girl.

It is no coincidence that immediately following this incident, Jesus gets back on the road, goes to another non-Jewish town and finds a man who is deaf and mute. There, without any questions or

arguments or disrespect, Jesus heals the man. Jesus heals this man because in a way the deaf/mute man symbolized himself! Jesus was also healing himself!

Until that foreign woman came into his life, Jesus was deaf to understanding that his mission and message was meant for the whole world. He had been conditioned by his culture not to listen to others. Furthermore, Jesus was mute in terms of speaking with others who were too different from him. With the healing of the deaf/mute man, Jesus himself could speak knowing that his words should be heard by everyone everywhere. He realized that God embraced all humanity in all its diversity in all its richness in all its differences.

And friends, so should we.

This program year, 2021-22 is certainly the most important year in our church's existence, at least since the 1930s. As you know, we are in the process of evaluating ourselves as a congregation and as a group of followers serving Jesus Christ. We had many decisions to make and a lot of work to do.

Today's lesson is so appropriate for where we as Collingswood Presbyterian Church find ourselves right now. In today's lesson Jesus changed. He changed his understanding of himself and his purpose to be much broader and more inclusive than he ever thought he would be. He opened himself to new ideas and new people while clearly rejecting the cultural training and prejudicial baggage he had been born and raised with.

The challenge before us, as individuals, as a congregation, and as a society, is whether we have the capacity and desire to follow Jesus to take time to examine and re-examine ourselves. Are we willing, are we able to ask the hard questions about what ideas are preventing us from fulfilling God's plan for what we are supposed to be? We must ask ourselves are we deaf to the needs and cries of society because we have been conditioned to block them out of our minds? And finally, are we mute? Are we afraid, unwilling, or unable to speak and share, and do the good news to everyone we encounter and even the strangers we will never meet?

Oh yes, this is a pivotal scripture in the life of Jesus because the demon that departed from that little girl just might be the same demon that is standing in the way of you and me and Collingswood Presbyterian Church and this nation and this world from fully accepting and responding to the call to share and spread the good news with everyone we meet and everywhere we go.

The time for change has come! Let us follow Our Lord and change as he did!

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.