

### “Be Open”

As I may well have said before, the Gospel According to Mark is my favorite of the Gospels. Mark’s Gospel has a strong sense of urgency. Everything happens “immediately” and I think Mark’s other favorite word is “and.” The Gospel at times reads like a breathless account and the writer cannot get out the exciting news of Jesus fast enough. The gospel also has a sense of earthiness and realness. Jesus gets tired and exasperated, he is not perfect. Indeed, throughout the Gospel of Mark Jesus seems very human. Or at least a human who is getting used to the idea that he also is divine.

Today’s reading includes a pair of the stories that show us the some very human qualities of Jesus clearly. But first there is an important geographical point to be aware of. The narrator begins today’s reading by telling us that Jesus set out for the region of Tyre. Jesus has been preaching and teaching in the area around Gennesaret which is between Magdala and Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee. Whether to get away from the crowds who seem to be everywhere he turns or to escape the Pharisees and Scribes who came from Jerusalem to question him, he makes the decision to walk forty or more miles to the area of Tyre (see attached map). That is he is leaving the Jewish region of Galilee and heading north and west to a Gentile region perhaps as an escape.

When he arrives he goes into a house and no sooner than he does so then he is accosted by a local woman of Syrophoenician origin, that is, from the area of Syria and Phoenicia. She is a Gentile woman and therefore has two strikes against her. But she approaches Jesus in a very humble manner. The NRSV<sup>1</sup> translation says she bows to Jesus but a better translation is that she throws herself at his feet and begs him to cure her daughter who has a demon. Jesus looks at her and as usual tells her, “Never in all of Israel have I found faith like yours, your daughter is cured.” At least that is what we would expect Jesus to say. Instead, Mark records that Jesus responds, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Jesus just called this woman and her daughter dogs. What’s more he says, “Let the children be fed first.” This woman is asking for her child to be made well, why does her child not count?

Of course, Jesus means that the children of Israel should be fed first. To put it rather grossly he has told her that he does not have time for a Gentile dog like her. He is busy saving the Jews. That is a rather harsh version of Jesus. However, this woman is not to be denied. She retorts, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” That is, “I am not asking for that much even we dogs would be satisfied with a crumb.”

At this Jesus relents. Still his manner is rather grudging. He does not give her credit for faith or belief as he often does when healing someone. Instead he says, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.” Needless to say when she gets home her daughter is well.

Let this exchange sink in. Jesus was approached by a Gentile woman asking for healing for her little girl. His first response was not one of mercy. Instead he is ready to dismiss her and her request because she is not Jewish. That is not the Jesus of Sunday School or greeting cards. It

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<sup>1</sup> New Revised Standard Version, ©1989.

seems to me that this is a Jesus who is still learning what it means to be Messiah. His understanding of his mission had been to reform Judaism. He does not have time for the Gentiles. In seems in this instance she is also a bother more than a person.

Yet the Syrophoenician woman's challenge of Jesus and his mission seems to take him aback. The next verse tells us that Jesus sets out for the Decapolis by way of Sidon. That is like deciding you will go to Virginia Beach by way of Martinsburg, West Virginia. If you are going to the Decapolis why would you go to Sidon first? That is the wrong direction. Perhaps Jesus had heard about Sidon and always wanted to visit, or he just had a bad sense of direction. Actually I think that the confrontation with the Syrophoenician women was so unsettling Jesus needed time to think it over. Instead of heading home he goes further into Gentile territory to avoid distractions and for time to rethink his ministry. This might be like another forty days in the wilderness. After his baptism he had to spend time there to sort out his calling. Now having been challenged about the people to whom he is to minister he needs time to think again. As he does he decides to head to another Gentile area, the Decapolis or the Ten Cities, which was on the opposite side of the Sea of Galilee from where he had previously been preaching and teaching.

There he is presented with a man for healing who is deaf and has a speech impediment. Instead of performing the healing in public he takes him aside. I think he is testing to see if his ministry really does include Gentiles. He puts his fingers in the man's ears, spits, and touches the man's tongue and says in Aramaic "Ephphatha" be opened. It works, but Jesus wants the man to tell no one. That is a rather absurd request given that the man has received this dramatic healing. Even if he tells no one they will figure it out. Word of Jesus' healing of this man spreads far and wide. His healing of the Gentile girl might be secret, but the Gentile man healing is in the open.

"Be open" might be the best title for this scene in Jesus' life. Not only because of the man who was opened, but because Jesus was opened to the wider realm of his ministry. Jesus' humanity which may have limited his understanding of the breadth of his ministry was challenged by Gentile woman. He becomes open to the possibility that his ministry is much more than he first perceived.

His humanity, which I so admire in Mark's portrait, initially closes him off to the possibilities of his ministry. It is the same humanity that allows him to reevaluate himself and what ministry he is called to in this world. I believe he struggles with and ponders this broader calling as he walks away from Palestine. It is the same humanity that leads him to new Gentile territory and a test of his calling there. It is the same humanity that will lead him to Jerusalem despite the certainty of peril and death. It is also the same humanity that cries out in the Garden of Gethsemane when he says, "But not my will but your will be done."<sup>2</sup>

For much of my early life I was told I had to be perfect as Jesus was perfect. In this story and others in Mark, I see that I can be human as Jesus was human. I can have doubts. I can fail or falter. I can perceive my call and be open to a new call that I was not ready to discern before.

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 22:42

One of my favorite authors, Norman Mclean wrote in the preface to his posthumously published book *Young Men and Fire*, "I can express my gratitude for still being around on the oxygen-side of the earth's crust only by not standing pat on what I have hitherto known and loved. While oxygen lasts, there are still new things to love, especially if compassion is a form of love."<sup>3</sup>

For Jesus there were new people to love. Like him we are called to love new people, indeed to love all people, even our enemies. Mark showed us in his Gospel the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Jesus' willingness to be human and to learn and broaden his view of compassion are examples for which we can be most grateful.



<sup>3</sup> Norman Mclean, *Young Men and Fire*, 1992.