Mark 7:24-37

The racial and religious differences between Jesus and the Gentile woman are unchanged. But what has changed is that courage and caring for a daughter have been shown to be acceptable to God - even when they come from a Gentile heart; even when they come from a woman's heart; even when they come from the heart of a woman who has publicly shamed herself by being out alone, by speaking to a man, and by daring to speak back to a man.

Year B
Pentecost 15
September 9, 2012
Sunday between September 4 and September 10 inclusive
Proper 18, Ordinary Time 23

Read the passage at the bottom of this post: Mark 7:24-37, The Message or Mark 7:24-37, The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

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Sermon by the Rev. Dr. George Hermanson, "Pushing The Boundaries."

In this week's lesson, Jesus is going to be challenged to practice what he preaches.

Last week, Jesus had successfully defended his disciples from the criticism by the Judean elite that they were not following "the tradition of the elders" when they ate without washing their hands.

His teaching:

There is nothing that goes into a person from the outside which can make them ritually unclean. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that makes them unclean. For from the inside, from a person's heart, come all the evil ideas which lead them to do immoral things.

Mark 7:15, 21 (Good News Bible)

radically altered two strict social boundaries.

First, Jesus opened the possibility that not only could one eat with unwashed hands - one could also eat with "unwashed" persons.

Up until this time, "the tradition of the elders" made it impossible for Jews to eat with non-Jews, with Gentiles. However, when this issue did arise later among the early church (see Acts 10), Peter was able to affirm, "I now realize that it is true that God treats everyone on the same basis. Whoever worships God and does what is right is acceptable to God, no matter what race they belong to."
Second, Jesus opened the possibility even a Gentile's heart might be acceptable to God.

Almost as if to prove this point, Mark immediately follows Jesus' teachings about what makes a person acceptable with this story of Jesus going into Gentile territory near the city of Tyre.

We're not told why Jesus did not want anyone to know where he was, but his fame is such that the gossip about him soon gets around.

An unnamed Gentile woman hears about Jesus and where he is staying and comes to see him. Will what is in her Gentile heart be acceptable to God?

What is in her heart is her daughter. She begs Jesus to drive an evil demon out of her daughter.

But Jesus insults her; he calls her a dog:

It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.
Mark 7:27

By this Jesus is meaning the children of Israel, and that his ministry is meant only for them. (See Matthew 15:24 for a parallel account of this story.)

But for the first - and only - time, Jesus is bested in debate.

The unnamed Gentile woman accepts the insulting language Jesus has used, but uses it to continue to press her request:

Even the dogs under the table eat the children's scraps.
Mark 7:28

For this answer, Jesus says to her that she may go home and will find that the demon has gone out of her daughter.

Notice that unlike the unnamed woman who touched his cloak (Mark 5:21-43), Jesus does not call this woman, "Daughter," nor does he say her faith / trust in him has made her daughter well.

The racial and religious differences between Jesus and the Gentile woman are unchanged.

But what has changed is that courage and caring for a daughter have been shown to be acceptable to God - even when they come from a Gentile heart; even when they come from a woman's heart; even when they come from the heart of a woman who has publically shamed herself by being out alone, by speaking to a man, and by daring to speak back to a man.
One wonders what might happen in our churches today if we listened more to what comes from the heart - or rather - paid less attention to "the tradition of the elders," to outer appearances and politeness and sought to more carefully align our hearts with God's heart?

The story of the deaf man with the speech impediment shows the difference that personal faith / trust, intentionality, and persistence make. Unlike the Gentile woman whose daughter is healed "for saying that," this man is brought to Jesus by others and Jesus must work hard - do all the work - to accomplish his healing.

I was blessed to hear my colleague, Janet Cawley, preach on this text, and appreciated her wondering aloud if the implied "Be open" that Jesus heard from the Gentile woman wasn't still echoing within Jesus in his command, "Be open" to the deaf man?

Once again, Jesus honourably demonstrates that he is not "showing off," not actively seeking public acclaim, by performing the healing in private. The results however are immediately obvious to the public, who are suitably awed. In this way, Jesus accomplishes two good things: the healing, and increased public honour.

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Historical background information in this post is drawn primarily from Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels, see link below, pages 176-177.

* Link to Amazon.com Bibliography for Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh, et. al., Social Science Commentary on ... The Synoptic Gospels; The Gospel of John; The Book of Acts; The Letters of Paul; The Book of Revelation; and others.

** Mark 7:24-37 (NRSV)**

24 From there he 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, 25 but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. 26 Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. 27 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." 28 But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." 29 Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." 30 So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

31 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. 32 They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. 33 He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers
into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. 34 Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." 35 And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. 36 Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. 37 They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."

Mark 7:24-37 (The Message)

24 From there Jesus set out for the vicinity of Tyre. He entered a house there where he didn't think he would be found, but he couldn't escape notice. 25 He was barely inside when a woman who had a disturbed daughter heard where he was. She came and knelt at his feet, 26 begging for help. The woman was Greek, Syro-Phoenician by birth. She asked him to cure her daughter.

27 He said, "Stand in line and take your turn. The children get fed first. If there's any left over, the dogs get it."

28 She said, "Of course, Master. But don't dogs under the table get scraps dropped by the children?"

29 Jesus was impressed. "You're right! On your way! Your daughter is no longer disturbed. The demonic affliction is gone." 30 She went home and found her daughter relaxed on the bed, the torment gone for good.

31 Then he left the region of Tyre, went through Sidon back to Galilee Lake and over to the district of the Ten Towns. 32 Some people brought a man who could neither hear nor speak and asked Jesus to lay a healing hand on him. 33 He took the man off by himself, put his fingers in the man's ears and some spit on the man's tongue. 34 Then Jesus looked up in prayer, groaned mightily, and commanded, "Ephphatha!—Open up!" 35 And it happened. The man's hearing was clear and his speech plain—just like that.

36 Jesus urged them to keep it quiet, but they talked it up all the more, 37 beside themselves with excitement. "He's done it all and done it well. He gives hearing to the deaf, speech to the speechless."