

Extra! Extra! Read All About It!
Mark 7:24-36
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights
January 24, 2010
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Think about a time when you were really, really eager to spend time with someone. Someone...special. Think about a time when you were excited because you would have your dad, or your boyfriend, or your sister *all to yourself!* A time when you were thinking that you'd be able just to be together with someone about whom you care very much.

Can you think of a time like that? Now, imagine that at the last moment, your little brother, or your boyfriend's mother, or your sister's roommate decided that they were going to be included in your *special time*. Doesn't that just stink? Isn't that a pain in the neck? You have to *share* your time – time that is not as special now because *she's* here?

Last week we talked about the big shift that takes place in Mark 7. Jesus is apparently wanting to spend some time and energy with those who follow him most closely, and so he decides to get out of town for a while. So verse 24 picks up the action as he and the gang head out towards Tyre – a journey of about fifty miles. Now, ordinarily, that would create a little bit of a problem, because they were leaving the predominately Jewish areas and going into Gentile territory – but in the first part of Mark 7, Jesus teaches the disciples that all foods are clean – they won't have to worry about their diet – they can go where they want to go.

How great it must have felt to be out away from the conflict, away from the distractions, away from the pressures of life where “everyone knew everyone else”! Now they were really going to learn from the Master! Now they were going to be fed! Everything is just great...until SHE shows up.

Who? That woman. The outsider. She was a Gentile. From Syria. Oh, great. She barges right into the house where Jesus and the twelve are staying, and she just won't shut up about her daughter. And Jesus doesn't seem to do anything at first. In fact, when Matthew tells this story in Matthew 15, he says that finally the disciples come to Jesus and say, “Will you please do something about her? She's really getting on our nerves. AND she's messing up our special time with you.”

They don't want her around. Who does? She's an outcast. She's different. She's annoying. And Jesus apparently plays into their desires, because he looks her in the eye and says something that seems to be incredibly cruel. “I didn't come to take care of the dogs”, he says. Dogs! I don't think that word sounds quite as contemptuous as it was. When a Jewish person referred to a Gentile with that word, it was a way of dismissing that person's humanity – an open declaration of the fact that the person was lower than low. In fact, in those days, people used the word “dog” the way that 21st century Americans use the word “bitch” now. When you apply that label to an animal, it means a female

canine. When you apply it to a person, it is utterly dismissive. Do you see what I mean? And that's what Jesus calls this woman. And nobody – including the woman herself – raises an eyebrow. What she does, do, however, is respond in faith. She acknowledges who he is, and asks him to act like it. And when Jesus sees her faith, he announces that her daughter has been healed and she leaves.

Why is that story in the book of Mark? Why do we need to hear it? Well, remember – why did Jesus leave Galilee in the first place? To form his disciples, right? To spend some special time with them, shaping them for the kinds of ministry and challenges they would face for the rest of their lives. I would like to suggest that he began the conversation with this woman by following the customary pattern of interaction between Jews and Gentiles and showing the incredible prejudice that the disciples took for granted – and then turning it on its head and showing that such prejudice had no place in his Kingdom. One writer puts it this way: “His purpose, in other words, was not to test the woman’s faith so much as it was to reveal [that faith] to the disciples, and to reveal it in such a way that it would be impressed forever upon their memories.”¹

One of the things that Jesus did when he took his disciples on this field trip fifty miles away from home was to impress upon them that there was no such thing as an outsider – the old prejudices had to die, and he allowed this woman to teach them that by displaying her faith. And the disciples learned that truth, and they learned it well. Within fifty years of his death, people throughout the Roman world could not believe that the followers of Jesus included people of every race and social station. The early church was free from the kinds of prejudice that had been the norm as the disciples were growing up.

But the field trip isn't over. Next stop: The Decapolis. The “Ten Towns” that are south of Galilee. We haven't been there since that little jaunt where Jesus healed the demon-possessed man by sending the demons into the pigs and then everybody asked him to please leave quickly and quietly. What's happening in the Decapolis today?

[Read Mark 7:31-37]

Well, it's another case of an encounter with an outsider. We're not sure whether this unfortunate man is looked down upon by virtue of his ethnic heritage, but he is surely marginalized by his disabilities. And, as you heard, Jesus heals the man. Mark's description is graphic and, by our ears, a little gross. Do we have to know about the spit? Do we have to picture Jesus rubbing his fingers in the man's ears? I mean, OK, OK, I get it. You can heal people, Jesus. Why is Mark telling us about this one now?

Well, Mark says something special about this particular man. We read in verse 32 that the man was deaf and that he had a speech impediment. So? I mean, in earlier chapters, Jesus has taken care of a woman who'd been bleeding

¹ Ernest Thompson, *The Gospel of Mark and Its Meaning for Today* (1954 John Knox) p. 134

for 12 years...a little kid who had died. Speech impediments? Heck, Jesus could do those in his sleep, right?

Except when Mark tells us about this man, he uses a special word. The word for “speech impediment” is *μογιλαλον*, and it’s a peculiar word in Greek. In fact, in the Greek Bible, that word is only used one other time. Take a look at your bulletin – the “Call to Worship”. Look at the last line – the quote from Isaiah 35. Where it says, “speechless” – that’s the same word. *Μογιλαλον*.

OK, Dave, well what’s such a big deal about that? Listen: Isaiah 35 was a well-known passage in Jesus’ day. It was a piece of scripture that “everybody knew”. And what they knew was that Isaiah 35 was about the time when God’s kingdom would come on earth. Some words, you just don’t use by accident. Some words you use because you want them to remind the hearers of something else. For instance, the word “immaculate” – most of the time, it means “clean” or “spotless.” How did your room look? Oh, great. It was immaculate. Thanks. But when I use that word in reference to a man catching a football almost forty years ago, and talk about Franco Harris and the Immaculate Reception, then you think of the word “immaculate” as being connected to the miraculous birth of Jesus, and all of a sudden we both know that we’re not talking about an ordinary football play, right?

So when Mark tells us that this man was *μογιλαλον* – when the crowd sees that a man who was at one moment *μογιλαλον* and at the next moment is singing like a songbird, Mark is saying that the people in the crowd – yes, even a crowd in the Decapolis – that those people are saying that Jesus is God’s New Thing in the world.

And when the crowd realizes that, then something happens to the people in that village. They stop being spectators and start being preachers. Mark says that the more Jesus told them to keep things on the down-low, the more they “proclaimed” it. Again, that’s a special word – “proclaim”. It literally means, “publish”. It’s a very formal word, and it indicates that the people in the Decapolis recognized who was with them that day, and what he was doing, and they made a formal announcement – that God’s purposes are being fulfilled.

And why is this story in Mark? For much the same reason as the one about the Syrophonecian woman – because as Jesus is forming and shaping and molding his disciples, he puts them in a place where they can see that other people are recognizing him for who he is and what he is about. Don’t you think that in the years to come there were times when the Disciples had to be saying to themselves, “Whoa...am I dreaming this? Am I making something out of nothing in my head?” And on those days, they could remember the faith of the woman who was an outcast; they could remember the crowds who were publishing the news of God’s saving love, and they could say to themselves, “No, it’s not just me. It is something amazing. Something worth living for. Something worth dying for.”

So that’s what I thought the key insight in the passage was...until Thursday morning when I started to dig around in the scriptures. I thought it was a passage

about how Jesus purposefully withdrew from Galilee and took his disciples along with him, and in the midst of some pretty cool healings, barriers were broken down, prejudices were exposed, and the truth got published. And, to be honest, that's a fair reading of the text.

But wait! There's more!

What would you say if I told you that not long ago, I went from here to Erie? Well, you probably wouldn't say much. It's no big deal – get on 79, head north for two hours, there you go. But what if I said that I went from here to Erie, but I stopped in Wheeling on the way? You'd make me back up, wouldn't you? Erie is ninety miles north. Wheeling is 44 miles south. Why would I go to Erie by way of Wheeling? That doesn't make sense.

In the reading for today, Jesus goes from Capernaum to Tyre. That's about fifty miles northwest. Then, in verse 31, we read that "he returned from the region of Tyre and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, through the region of the Decapolis." Sidon is about 35 miles NORTH of Tyre. The Decapolis is about 70 miles SOUTH of Tyre. Saying that he went from Tyre to Decapolis "by way of" Sidon is like saying that I went to Erie "by way of" Wheeling.

So I got out a map and I looked – there you can see it on the screen. Jesus took the disciples on a field trip that involved them walking about 250 miles – most of it through unfamiliar territory. Why?

Well, what was he trying to do? He was trying to shape the disciples, right? He was spending time with them, and putting them in situations where they could hear him teach and watch him interact with others. Jesus was not out to rally the crowds – although he could do that on an afternoon if he wanted to. He was out to change the world by shaping the lives of the people with whom he was closest. And he didn't choose to shape those lives by razzle dazzle. He shaped them one step, one mile, one day at a time.

That doesn't make sense to us. Our world is one of instant gratification. We want fast food, non-stop flights, and microwavable burritos. Don't make me wait for anything, and don't waste my time. But here is Jesus walking 250 miles with his followers – a journey that must have taken several months. And all we hear about it is a woman whose daughter was healed and a man who learned to sing.

But in those 250 miles, Jesus took his followers away from distractions. For weeks, they were with him – and only him. They heard him, but they heard others, too. They saw new things. They ate new food. They sat in places where they never would have.

This raises two questions for me, and I'm going to share them with you. First, it makes me wonder, "does my walk with the Lord have the same kind of power?" I am an impatient man. "Yes, yes, Lord! Use me Lord. Teach me Lord! Fill me, Lord!...but could you make it snappy, because *30 Rock* starts at 9:30 and I hate to miss another episode. Am I willing to go with Jesus on these long walks –

to put myself in places where I can be free to concentrate on him and on his best for me for long periods of time? Or am I tethered by my distractions and concerns? Lord, I want to be free to walk with you and be shaped by you for the long haul.

And secondly, I have to ask myself whether I'm willing to walk with someone who is "other" for an extended period of time. Jesus walked with the disciples into strange places and re-wrote the book on what was acceptable and what was not. Am I willing to be in uncomfortable places with you? Am I willing to sit with people who give me the heebie-jeebies because they are different than me? Am I willing to try to learn from someone who sees life through another lens? Can I share the journey?

Jesus healed the daughter in Tyre. He touched a man in the Decapolis. How do I model that kind of passion and love in my daily life? Who are we touching? Where are we walking? How far are we willing to go? And who goes with us? May God prod us with questions like that in ways that make us faith-full and obedient today. Amen.