

September 5, 2021  
Mark 7:24-37

Pentecost 15  
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

## **“Do I Sound Like That?”**

*“He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.”*

A regular part of my weekly routine since the beginning of the pandemic involves writing and preaching sermons. I have never been a last-minute sermon writer; I have always preferred to have my sermon finished by Thursday or Friday at the latest so that I have time to prepare to deliver it on Sunday morning. While my writing routine has remained unchanged, there is now greater urgency to have my sermon written on time, because Friday mornings have become my recording day. This began very suddenly in March of 2020, when everything shut down as we were coming to terms with the severity of the COVID-19 virus. Suddenly, what had been unthinkable was a reality: we were unable to gather for Sunday morning worship. In all my years of ordained ministry, there was only one time when I had to cancel worship; it was when my congregation on Long Island was in a hurricane evacuation zone, and no one was allowed around the church building. Finding ourselves in a new and unfamiliar position, we did something that many of us in the church had never attempted: preach to a web camera and post our sermons and worship services online. My first attempts (which have mercifully been erased) show how new I was to this form of preaching, and every time I watched one of these recordings, I cringed at how I looked and sounded, the way I delivered a sentence, and how what seemed good on paper did not translate well to my on-camera efforts. Time and again I found myself asking the question, “Do I sound like that?”

I have gotten more comfortable with preaching to my camera and posting my sermons on Zion’s website; but when I look at my recordings (mostly to see if the process went smoothly) I have thought back to my past and times when I was glad that what I was saying was not recorded. It isn’t simply a matter of the sound of my voice or the style of my delivery; I know that there have been times when the words of my mouth were not, in the words of the psalmist, “*acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.*” (Psalm 19:14). I have spoken words that have been cruel, unkind, and even hurtful; I have had to confess that I have sinned against the Lord in thought, word, and deed. If someone had a recording device to play what I had said back to

me, I probably would have been shocked and ashamed, reacting with regret as I asked in disbelief “do I sound like that?”

We may find ourselves asking this question about Jesus after hearing his words in today’s Gospel lesson, because his response to the request of the Syrophenician woman does not sound like words we expect to hear from our Lord, and certain not words that sound acceptable to God the Father Almighty. After his conflict with the Pharisees and scribes over their interpretation of the “tradition of the elders,” Jesus “*set out and went away to the region of Tyre*” (Mark 7:24). This city was north of Galilee in Gentile territory, a region that included people who were despised by Jesus’ people (“*What are you to me, O Tyre and Sidon, and all the regions of Philistia? Are you paying me back for something? If you are paying me back, I will turn your deeds back upon your own heads swiftly and speedily.*” – Joel 3:4). It seems that Jesus is exhausted and is seeking some “down time” as “*he entered a house and did not want anyone to know where he was*”; but even in Gentile territory word had spread about Jesus, so that “*he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed at his feet.*” (7:25). Mark identifies this woman as “*a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin*”; in approaching Jesus and requesting healing for her daughter, she is breaking every traditional barrier that should have prevented her from doing so:

- “She is implicitly impure, one who lives outside of the land of Israel and outside of the law of Moses, a descendant of the ancient enemies of Israel. She is also a woman, unaccompanied by a husband or male relative, who initiates a conversation with a strange man – another taboo transgressed ... Any way you look at it, this woman is an outsider.” – Elisabeth Johnson.

These barriers clearly do not matter to this woman; she is desperate for her daughter to be healed, so she bows at Jesus’ feet and “*begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.*” (7:26). We would expect such an act of faith and devotion would be noticed by Jesus, and that he would grant the woman her request and heal the daughter of this affliction (as he responded earlier in the Gospel to the woman who was healed by touching Jesus’ garment, saying to her “*daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.*” – 5:34). But this is not how Jesus responds to this Gentile mother’s desperate plea; instead, he responds with words that shock and disturb us: “*Let the children be fed first, for it is not faith to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.*” (7:27). Dogs in the ancient world

were far from beloved family pets; the term “dog” (*kynarion*) was usually an insult intended to degrade those of whom it was used:

- “The Philistine said to David, ‘Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?’” – 1 Samuel 17:43.
- “Israel’s sentinels are blind, they are all without knowledge; they are all silent dogs that cannot bark; dreaming, lying down, loving to slumber.” – Isaiah 56:10.
- “Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh!” – Philippians 3:2.

Jesus may be quoting a bit of Jewish folk wisdom, but that does not lessen the sting of these words. He appears to be dividing humanity into two groups, “us vs. them,” the “children” of Israel receiving preferential treatment as opposed to the “dogs” of the outsiders, Gentiles such as this woman. While Matthew’s version of this story includes Jesus’ statement that “*I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel*” (Matthew 15:24), it is still hard to believe that our Lord and Saviour would respond to the pious request of a woman for her daughter’s healing in such a harsh, uncaring, and xenophobic manner.

But the one person who does not appear to be shocked or disturbed by Jesus’ words is the Syrophenician woman, whose reply shows that she is able to engage the challenge posed by Jesus’ words better than his own disciples do: “*Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.*” (7:28). Her response uses the ambiguity surrounding the term “dog” to turn the demeaning metaphor to her advantage. While it would be wrong to feed the dogs food that the children need, everyone knows that dogs are permitted to eat what the children drop under the table. Her retort reverses the prejudices on both sides of the debate: “*The exchange with the woman points toward the future in which Gentiles will be included; their faith will bring them salvation.*” (Pheme Perkins). Her response results in her request being granted: “*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.*” (7:29-30). Jesus appears to agree that “*God’s love and healing power know no ethnic, political, or social boundaries*” (Johnson).

Following this disturbing encounter with the Syrophenician woman, Jesus continues his journey through Gentile territory as he “*went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis*” (7:31). Jesus’ fame has also spread to this region, for “*they brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in speech; and*

*they begged him to lay his hands on him*” (7:32), reminiscent of the action of another group of friends who *“removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay”* (2:4). Unlike in his healing of the Syrophenician woman’s daughter, who is healed from afar, Jesus *“took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue.”* (7:33). As with the raising of Jairus’ daughter from the dead, Jesus speaks in his native Aramaic (*“He took her by the hand and said to her, ‘Talitha cum,’ which means, ‘Little girl, get up!’ And immediately the girl got up and began to walk”* – 5:41-42): *“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.”* (7:34-35). Jesus orders the crowd to tell no one about what they have witnessed (a frequent command in the Gospels, because many might not fully understand who Jesus is before he is fully revealed in his death and resurrection); but this has little effect, for *“the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it”* (7:36). The crowd praises Jesus for bringing salvation promised in the prophets: *“Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.”* (Isaiah 35:5). The response that *“he has done everything well”* may be associated with the judgment of creation expressed in Genesis: *“God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good”* (Genesis 1:31). Healings of blind, deaf, and disabled persons are all signs of the messianic age, which the crowd declares has been fulfilled by Jesus’ healing acts. As Jesus had challenged the “traditions of the elders” that had erected artificial barriers that divided God’s people, now Jesus is challenging the boundaries that had kept people divided and separated from one another and from the presence of the Lord whose salvation and goodness is for all people.

- “In these stories Jesus declares all persons clean, whether a Gentile woman in a pagan city or a man of indeterminate race in the unclean territory of the Decapolis. These stories are two examples of the same principle: both advance Jesus’ repudiation of traditional taboos.” – Lamar Williamson, Jr.

Jesus’ healing ministry in Gentile territory provided the early church with a warrant for its mission to the Gentiles by grounding that mission in the earthly ministry of Jesus himself. Both healing stories point to the universal scope of God’s gracious action in Christ, who is *“Lord of all”* (Acts 10:36). It will be the mission of the church to *“make disciples of all nations”* (Matthew 28:19), to *“be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth”* (Acts 1:8), to confess along with Simon Peter that *“God shows no partiality, but in every nation*

*anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:34-35). Jesus’ acts of healing of persons once considered outsiders points “to the universal scope of God’s gracious action in Christ, pushing Christians of every age to faithful proclamation and compassionate service in every place and to all people.” (Williamson). Jesus does indeed “love the little children, **all** the little children of the world.”*

We might conclude that “all’s well that ends well,” that in the end the Syrophenician woman’s daughter was healed and the man in the Decapolis could hear and speak. But that still does not explain why Jesus spoke to the desperate mother in Tyre in such a seemingly cruel, heartless fashion. Why did he not show compassion toward her? Why put her through such an ordeal at a time of such an acute need? How could Jesus look upon any person – no matter where they lived or who they worshipped – as a “dog,” as less than human, as someone who was unworthy to receive God’s blessings?

Many have debated what motivated Jesus to speak in such an uncharacteristic fashion; but perhaps what Jesus is doing is not expressing what he is thinking but repeating back what he has heard people saying about persons on the other side of the border, persons who were unlike them. If we are shocked by Jesus’ words, then we must ask ourselves if we have uttered similar words. If someone were to follow us around and record our conversations, would we discover that we have spoken about others in a manner than is even more shocking than what Jesus says here? Jesus may be holding a mirror up to us to challenge our former ways of thinking about other persons; indeed, this encounter begins a ministry in which Jesus purposely goes into region where no one of his people would dare travel (the route described in 7:31 makes no sense geographically but makes sense if one looks at it as a roadmap for Jesus’ ministry to the Gentiles). Jesus may well be shocking us into considering the ways in which we have looked upon others so that we might be prepared for the mission into which our Lord is calling us, one where we may be called to bring the good news of Jesus Christ to persons who we may have crossed the street to avoid, persons who we have formerly seen as different than us and even inferior to us. Jesus may be preparing us to the coming of the Kingdom of God in which “*there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*” (Galatians 3:28). Jesus prepares his disciples to bring the Gospel to “all nations,” another word for Gentiles, and specifically calls Paul to be the “apostle to the Gentiles,” because in the new age that Christ inaugurates we no longer look upon each other as we may have in the past, but

look at each other through the “grace healed eyes” that sees every person for who they now are as beloved children of God.

- “From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” – 2 Corinthians 5:16-17.

Jesus may have entered Gentile territory for a respite from the crush of the crowds, but it becomes the beginning of a chapter of his ministry in which yet another dividing wall comes down. As God in Christ has called the church to be “ambassadors of reconciliation,” we are called to repent of our former ways of looking upon others as outsiders, as inferior, as unworthy of God’s grace and unwelcome in God’s house. We need to confess that “*racism in all its forms is the exact opposite of our values as Christians ... The unity of the church should be a sign to believe in God’s love and salvation for all in Jesus Christ. The unity of the church can only be based on the shared Christian faith in the triune God, the creator of all in God’s image and likeness...*” (Olav Fykse Tveit, World Council of Churches). We pray that God will move us “*open our hearts, bodies, minds, and souls to the cries of our people. Transform us by your presence [as] we pray for the elimination of racial discrimination in the name of Jesus.*” (ELCIC Litany of Repentance).

If we are shocked by Jesus’ words to the Syrophenician woman, perhaps we need to ask ourselves: *Do I sound like that?* Far more than being disturbed by how we look or sound in a recording, we need to focus on what we say. Words can be a blessing or a curse; words can hurt, and words can heal. May all our words and deeds be appropriate to the people we are through Holy Baptism. May all the words we speak – to ourselves and to others – be acceptable in the sight of the one who love all people and welcomes all into the fellowship of God’s beloved children. May all our words be words of welcome in the name of the one who welcomes all people into his fellowship – Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.

Amen.