

Desperate Measures Part 1: Desire for Healing
Scriptures: Isaiah 35:4-7a. Mark 7:24-37 (Ord 23B)
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Fort Hill Presbyterian Church
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Scripture: Mark 7: 24-37

And from there Jesus arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And he entered a house, and would not have any one know it; yet he could not be hid. But immediately a woman, whose little daughter was possessed by an unclean spirit, heard of him, and came and fell down at his feet. Now the woman was a Greek, a Syrophenician by birth. And she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. And he said to her, "Let the children first be fed, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." And he said to her, "For this saying you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter." And she went home, and found the child lying in bed, and the demon gone.

Then Jesus returned from the region of Tyre, and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, through the region of the Decapolis. And they brought to him a man who was deaf and had an impediment in his speech; and they besought him to lay his hand upon him. And taking him aside from the multitude privately, he put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue; and looking up to heaven, he sighed, and said to him, "Eph'phatha," that is, "Be opened." And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. And he charged them to tell no one; but the more he charged them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, "He has done all things well; he even makes the deaf hear and the dumb speak."

Proclamation of the Word

The Voice of a Disciple

James: Here she came just prancing into the house....that outsider...a Greek, a woman. Jesus had come here to rest and recuperate. Did she not know that Jesus had just heard the news of his cousin John's death? John was murdered at the hands of a drunken king and at the whim of that king's silly daughter.

I think that put him over the edge. When Jesus met the Pharisees his patience were running low. They were arguing over purity laws and what and who was clean and unclean. Don't they get it? Jesus has come to make things right and reveal God to us. Jesus was so fed up. He was grieving, and we convinced him to get away. So we took off for the seaside island of Tyre. We thought there, at least, we could lodge at the home of fellow Jews who were believers, and find some peace.

Then she waltzed in. A woman of means and social standing just came right into this house of Jews. The host looked shocked. Jesus did not want anyone to know we were there. Everywhere we went the crowds chased him down asking for healing, a miracle, a bite to eat. But Jesus could not escape notice.

I wanted to protect him from people. He deserved rest. We were all exhausted, but he had suffered enough. And frankly, we were afraid. Look what had happened to John.

Reflections on the Scripture

I imagine that might have been what was going on inside any of the disciples' heads. Fear is an amazing emotion. Fear causes us to be cautious of things that might bring us harm, but if fear consumes us, we become desperate. These next three weeks we will be following Jesus among people who take desperate measures because of deep desires. Those desires rise up out of love and out of fear- the strongest of human emotions. Today we encounter two people whose desires for healing bring them to Jesus. They hunt him down. They have caught wind that he is in their neighborhood, and they are driven by love and fear, perhaps, to find him.

Love and fear, the combination can be used for good or for harm. In the encounter with the Syrophenician woman and with the people who bring the deaf and mute man to Jesus, our characters are moved to action. They find Jesus at any cost.

First, we look at Jesus' encounter with the woman. For one, she is an outsider. She is a pagan, a Gentile. Gentile is a broad term for non Jews who do not worship Yahweh God revealed in the Hebrew Bible. The woman driven by love and fear pushes her way into this home. She has offended the sensibilities of the Jewish homeowners as well as the disciples for certain. There is no hiding the prejudice that divides these two kinds of people. The Bible doesn't hide it or gloss over it. And the exchange between the woman and Jesus makes some of us good church folk uncomfortable. Jesus is offensive. Hear it again,

And she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. And he said to her, "Let the children first be fed, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."

"How rude," we think. She is begging for help and Jesus makes a racial slur. He calls her a dog. Jews (and many groups) called those who were outside the faith and outside of their ethnic group "dog". It would not be unlike the slur used to call the main characters in *Slumdog Millionaire*. It is derogatory and offensive. If you have not seen this movie, I commend it to you. Jamal Malik, the boy whose life we follow in the movie, has a few marks against him. Jamal is the Slumdog Millionaire. First, he is poor. He is living in an Indian slum without a father. Secondly, he is Muslim outside of the dominant Hindu faith. Then because of

being a Muslim his mother and many in his slum are killed leaving him an orphan. He is just a Slumdog- a beggar child. He is the wrong ethnicity and the wrong faith. In one scene, we see Jamal, his brother, and his friend Latika as children at the Mumbai dump. They are sifting through the mounds of trash to find food or items for resale. They have made a makeshift tent at the trash dump. It is their home. You and I would not allow our dogs in a place like that, yet children across the globe are forced into a slavery of poverty. A “savior figure” - a nice man offers the children and many more like them a soda and lures them into a brothel of begging children. After feeding their bellies and giving them shelter, he puts them to work begging on the city streets. In a very painful scene one child’s eyes are badly damaged and the child is rendered blind. Why? ...because blind children bring in more money for the slum lord.

And here comes this Greek pagan woman begging for help....

And she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. And Jesus said to her, "Let the children first be fed, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."

I hope Jesus is saying what appears to be a slam, a slur because it is what his Jewish hosts might be thinking themselves. He may be reflecting the thoughts of his disciples as I imagined in the beginning of this sermon. He knows they are put off by this pushy woman. I hope Jesus says this while winking, testing the woman. It is verbal sparring not unlike the kind a good teacher would use with a student, to elicit the correct response. The Greek philosophers used this method, and the woman being a Greek would know the routine.

Hear again what she says in response:

But she answered him, "Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." And he said to her, "For this saying you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter."

The miracle here is healing, but not simply the healing the daughter of the demon. I think the deeper healing is for those who witnessed it. They see that Jesus even in his exhaustion is gracious to those who are in need. He confronts the prejudice in a crafty way. When she comes to him for help, he is not put off by her. She has humbled herself to the point of begging. She has respectfully called him “sir.” She comes trusting that he is one who can help the daughter she loves even in the face of her own fear of rejection. That is fierce tenderness...shown by both Jesus and the woman. In the face of prejudice and the boundaries that exist, they both cross over into the geography of grace.

A different healing happens with the man who is deaf and, consequently, has a speech impediment. Luckily, he has advocates who can speak for him just as the woman speaks for her daughter. The mother and the unnamed advocates who bring the deaf man to Jesus all BEG for his help.

Have you ever begged for help? It is not a position that most of us like to be in. It is especially impressive that they were willing to beg on behalf of another. And Jesus heals the man in a very different way. Jesus is hands on. He sticks his fingers in the man's ears, spits, and touches the man's tongue. He says, "BE OPENED!" And the man is healed. He can listen now. He can speak clearly. The witnesses are so amazed and astounded that even against Jesus' wishes; they all tell what has happened.

We know that prejudice exists everywhere- even within our own hearts. Prejudice is a human reality, born out of fear- fear of difference or change or harm. Usually the deeper fear is a fear of loss. We fear losing what we have whether it is power, position, land, control, and in current national debate (or argument)- our healthcare.

Healing and Healthcare

In terms of the debate over healthcare, have you heard the amount of fear that is out there? Perhaps you are afraid of losing the privilege of good care for yourself and those you love. Or maybe you are desperate because you or those you love are in such a precarious position without any healthcare to speak of. And the reports we hear the loudest are of fear. Jesus' words, "Be Opened!" kept ringing in my ears this week.

I was thoroughly convicted this week when I received a letter from Doug Baker. Doug has become a friend through the church. He is a Presbyterian Missionary in Belfast, Ireland. My last church supported the work there. Doug Baker has influenced some of you. Bobby Williamson and Lauren Simmons who grew up in this church worked with Doug in mission there. Doug is a US citizen who has served in mission in Belfast making peace between Protestants and Catholics. He pointed out the log in our eyes in his letter to us here in the US. Basically, Doug said I am tired of hearing the slams and slurs against the healthcare system that has provided for his family all these years. In fact, he presented a different viewpoint that you and I are hearing. Doug goes on to give witness to all the ways his family has been cared for including house calls and quality service when his son now 18 was born with breathing difficulties with 2 years of follow-up care. When the man who had a speech impediment and could not hear could not ask for help, others speak for him. Doug speaks the truth of the healing he has seen. Some would simply write Doug off and label him, "Socialist." I was convicted. How easily we allow fear and prejudice to make us close our ears and not hear. When we stop listening, we cannot learn. When we are not learning, we cannot address solutions to very complex problems. And in this case, the problem is healing and health. If Jesus is concerned about it, we should be too.

In all fairness, we need to listen not only to those who receive healthcare, but those who provide it. I have a brother who has a Master's degree from Clemson in City and Regional Planning and is a Hospital Administrator. Rob is the VP for

Planning and Business Development. He considers himself a conservative, a Republican. I also appreciate his take on things just as I value Doug's response on the National Health for the UK. Rob was able to help me understand how complicated the healthcare system is. It represents 16% of our economy, and lots of people have a stake in it. Real solutions are hard to come by in his opinion, because each party comes with a special interest. Rob personally knows the cost of healthcare, too. His wife's cancer treatments cost him and Blue Cross/Blue Shield nearly a million dollars.

I found that this week the Scripture has forced me to ask questions of people who have various perspectives on health and healing. Jesus healed by saying "Be Opened!" and proceeded to enact healing. I regularly hear from those who lack health coverage as a pastor. My prayer is that instead of calling each other names like "Dog" or "flaming liberal" or "closed-minded conservative," we might have our ears opened. People say, "There are two sides to every story." I think that is wrong. "There are multiple sides to every issue." On healthcare we can all agree that reform is needed, and name calling does not profit any of us. My guess is that we cannot figure out the how without listening to other voices and working together.

My next door neighbor in Rock Hill was a pediatrician. Everyone in that town wanted to get their children into his practice, but when we moved there, they were full. Fortunately, though, we got to live next to Jeannie and Robert. Robert also has an additional degree in Christian Bio-Ethics. He is an elder in his church, and his vocation, his calling, is to serve in healing ministry. Every morning Robert would get on his exercise bike in his garage. I would always see him reading his Bible while riding his bike before heading off to work. His work is his ministry. When he lived in Greenville and was a part of a very successful practice, he was bothered that he was not able to serve working poor and poor children because his practice did not accept Medicare/Medicaid. He knows that Jesus has a special interest in the poor. In an unusual career move in his late thirties, he moved to Rock Hill and started Rock Hill Pediatrics. Rock Hill Pediatrics serves all God's children, and the practice is even more successful because of that in my opinion. He has listened to the woman who says, **"Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."**

Robert knows how difficult it is as a physician to care for those who need it. Robert now directs all Pediatric care for the Carolinas Medical healthcare that spans the greater Charlotte area including parts of South Carolina. He knows that much needs to be done. He knows, as many doctors do, that the poor are using the Emergency Department as a way to receive healthcare because the system sets up that situation. And we know the ripple effect when we have a medical emergency. He has been frustrated as a physician and a Christian with a heart for healing.

Robert and I are very similar. We love: God, God's church, jazz and, we both played saxophone. He loves to grow beautiful roses, and I love to admire them. But we are different in a few ways. Robert's church and denomination does not ordain women as officers or ministers. Before I knew he and Jeannie, I wondered at first how they might treat me. Then we came to know each other. When we ate together the last week before we left to move here, he prayed a prayer over our family that was indeed a blessing to me. He prayed for each of us. He prayed for this church. He prayed for my ministry among and with you. He and Jeannie are people who share the grace of Jesus. They love with a fierce tenderness. They have crossed over the boundaries that separate in order to share God's grace and to receive it. And my guess is that because of whom they are, ears have been opened, and I know people speak God's praise because of them.

Perhaps the enemies, "the dogs," the things that we fear are dangerous are not out there where lines of division are drawn. Perhaps it is not those people who frighten or disturb us who are dangerous. Perhaps the real danger we should fear is inside of us, the part that wants to cut ourselves off from "them".

So I ask you, no, I beg of you....

Will we listen to those who are begging for help?

Will we let Jesus unplug our ears and touch our tongues?

Will our own hearts and minds, then, be opened up to receive God's abundant, overflowing healing grace so that all God's children can share in that healing? Perhaps it is not too late for the deaf to hear and those who have no voice to speak...

Thanks be to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.