

In the name of God. Amen.

I.

There is a scene in the movie, *Walk the Line*, that is worth remembering. *Walk the Line* is the story of country singer Johnny Cash and in one of the early scenes, the boy Johnny and his older brother Jack are getting ready for bed. Jack is given to reading the Bible, as he is doing now, and he dreams of becoming a pastor. Johnny turns to his older brother and asks, “Why do you spend so much time reading the Bible?” Jack considers the question and then replies, “You can not help people unless you know the stories.”

“You can not help people unless you know the stories” — which suggests that stories like the ones we have in today’s gospel reading have something to give us, something to teach us. They are meant to help us. So what might these two stories – the story of the Syrophenician woman and the story of the deaf man – have to teach us?¹

In the preceding passage of Mark, Jesus “declares all foods clean” (7:19) and in these stories he is declaring all persons clean. The first story takes place in the region of Tyre and centers on a Gentile woman and her demon-possessed daughter. The second focuses on a man of indeterminate race in the unclean territory of the Decapolis. The two stories are examples of the same principle: in both, Jesus ignores traditional taboos to show compassion to those considered outside the family of faith.

II.

In the story of the Syrophenician woman, she has everything going against her when she pushes her way into Jesus’ presence. She is a woman and a Gentile from the wrong side of the tracks. She has no right to engage Jesus in conversation.²

Despite the dictates of custom, this woman does approach Jesus. She is driven by something more powerful than protocol; she is desperately afraid for her daughter’s life. She bows before Jesus and begs him to cast the demon out of her daughter. We expect our kind, loving Jesus to say, “Of course I will save your daughter,” but here Jesus is caught revealing his own human bias, that first and foremost, his mission is directed to the house of Israel.

He says 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” (vv. 26, 27). Jesus is telling this desperate woman that his mission is for the Jews and the Jews alone. He calls her a dog. Many who suffer these words might have crept away, feeling small and insignificant, but not the Syrophenician woman. She is determined and desperate. She is not only willing to stand before Jesus, she is – in her need – driven to her knees.

The Syrophenician mother is no different than many contemporary parents who want something better for their child. The mother knows that she is not considered a believer, but she also knows that only Jesus, Son of David, can help her daughter. She boldly responds, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs” (v. 28).

Can’t you just imagine her kneeling in front of him, her chin held high, looking Jesus in the eye and saying: . . . *even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master’s table. It is at this moment that Jesus models that faithfulness is in part a matter of reaching out beyond the boundaries of tradition, gender, religion. Jesus stretches the boundaries*

¹ David Vryhoff. “He has done all things well.” September 6, 2015. [https:// www.ssje.org](https://www.ssje.org).

² Amy C. Howe. *Feasting on the Word. Year B. Volume 4*. “Proper 18 (Sunday Between September 4 and September 10 inclusive).. A Pastoral Perspective.” (Louisville, Westminster, 2011) 44-48.

of God's community.³

Jesus' earlier prejudice is very human and his insight now perhaps divine. He instantly understands her challenge. His mission is not restricted to the Jews. God's love expands beyond all barriers. Rather than scolding her for her brashness, Jesus tells her, "For saying that, you may go. The demon has left your daughter" (v. 29).

III.

The story that follows the tale of the Syrophenician woman is also a story about healing and stretching the boundaries of God's community. A deaf man with a speech impediment is brought before Jesus. The people beg Jesus to lay hands on the man and heal him. Being deaf in the first century is not merely about not hearing or speaking clearly. Such a person lives in isolation, alone, unaware of the meaning of the many events going on around them; unable to express the ideas and concerns and feelings within them.

Physical impairment was also viewed as the consequence of sin. People who suffer from blindness, deafness, or withered limbs have almost the same status as women, little to none. They were often barred from the social and religious institutions of the day. In those days, people were afraid of physical differences and did not understand the biology of birth defects as we do today.

Jesus takes the man away from the crowd and puts his fingers in his ears, then spits and touches the man's tongue. Raising his eyes to heaven, Jesus says, *Ephphatha*, "Be opened" (vv. 33, 34). Immediately, the deaf man can hear and speak clearly. Jesus has not only released him from the bondage of his affliction, he reunites him with his community as well.

In both stories, Jesus' healing actions illustrate that a "worthless, Gentile girl whose mind is devoured by a demon" and a "good for nothing deaf man who can not even speak clearly are indeed children of God to be embraced and valued. Our authentic response to God's initiative "calls forth recognition that there are no external barriers between God and any human being: not race, class, ethnicity, gender, age or physical condition. Consequently, there should also be no such barriers between human beings."⁴

The people respond positively to Jesus' acts of healing. "He has done all things well," they say.

IV.

There is another question remaining. There is a story about a deaf person who, after reading the gospel story about the deaf man, wonders aloud, "What about me?" It is a legitimate question.

Though we know and savor Jesus' miracles, they end up being relatively few in number, not every deaf person is healed, not every blind person receives sight, not every lame person walks again, not every dead person is raised. In fact, miracles of Jesus, end up being relatively few in number, touching only a small portion of the population of Palestine in his day.

"Sometimes I wonder if the miracle stories in the Bible do more harm than good," writes noted author Barbara Brown Taylor. "They are spectacular stories, most of them, and there is a lot of comfort to be had from watching Jesus still the storm, heal the sick, raise the dead. His miracles remind us that the way things are not the way they will always be... "The problem with miracles," she says, "is that it is hard to witness them without wanting one of [my] own..."

³ David Bartlett. *What's Good About This News?* (Louisville: Westminster, 2003) 103.

⁴ Amy C. Howe. *Feasting on the Word. Year B. Volume 4.* "Proper 18 (Sunday Between September 4 and September 10 inclusive).. A Pastoral Perspective." (Louisville, Westminster, 2011) 44-48.

[but] most people do not get a miracle, and one of the meanest things religious people can do is to blame it on a lack of faith.”⁵

As a Priest and a pastoral care giver, I often encounter well-meaning people who visit a friend or loved one, but often leave her or him feeling that the reason they are not cured is because they lack sufficient faith. Or equally as inaccurate, tell them that someday, she or he will someday understand why God has caused whatever has befallen them. Illness, death of a loved one, you name it.

“I believe the church people [are] well-intentioned, Taylor continues. I also believe they have gotten mixed up about what causes miracles. They think faith makes miracles happen. They think miracles happen along the same lines as those strength tests you used to see at county fairs. It is all a matter of how hard you can hit the thing with the sledgehammer. If you are really strong, you can ring the bell. And if you are not, well, better luck next time...

It helps me to remember that Jesus prays for a miracle on the night before he dies. ‘For you, all things are possible,’ he prays to his Abba. ‘Remove this cup from me.’ Only when he opens his eyes, the cup is still there. Does he lack faith? I do not think so.

The miracle is that he drinks the cup, believing in the power of God more than he believes in his own. I do not expect any of us will stop praying for miracles. I hope not, because the world needs all the miracles it can get.

The power of God at work in and through Jesus, the power of God at work in and through us, is but a sign of things to come. The author of the Gospel of John expresses this when he chooses the word “signs” to describe the acts of Jesus rather than “miracles.” They are signs of what will be, of things yet to come, that give us life and hope in the present.

The promise of *Ephphatha* is open to all – “insiders” and “outsiders” alike. As the “sign” outside our church says, Whoever you are, you are welcome in this community of God. *Ephphatha*. Be open. Amen.

⁵ Barbara Brown Taylor. “The Problem with Miracles” in *Bread of Angels*. Cowley Publications, 1997, 136-140.