

Mark 7:24–37 (NRSV)

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, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. 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.” But she answered him, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” 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.

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. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. 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. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, “He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.”

## He Could Not Escape Notice

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: September 6, 2015 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: Mark 7:24–37

Jesus could not escape notice. Wherever he went he was recognized. This morning we find him far afield from his usual haunts. He's not down south in Jerusalem in Judea. [slide 1] He's not in his home area of Galilee. [slide 2] He's at Tyre, on the coast of the Mediterranean in what is now Lebanon. [slide 3] Rough mountain ranges and distance separated Tyre from more familiar places such as Nazareth, Capernaum and Bethsaida. [slide 4] The text tells us he went away to Tyre. He didn't want anyone to know he was there. He went on retreat, as it were. But almost immediately a gentile, a Syrophenician woman heard he was in town. She is identified as a Greek oriented woman in both religion and culture, likely a polytheist. Jesus went to the shore on a vacation far away from his home people, and even so, he was immediately recognized. [slide 5 – window placeholder]

The Syrophenician woman who recognizes him has a daughter possessed by a demon, and she begs Jesus to heal her. In what can hardly be said to be Jesus' most compassionate moment, he tells the woman, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Essentially he said, "Look, I work with the people of the one true God. I don't deal with pagans. I'm here on vacation. Leave me alone you dog."

But the woman persisted. "If I'm a dog, at least give me some table scraps." In the face of her doggedness Jesus relents and heals her daughter.

Many a sermon has been preached about the rather unflattering way in which Jesus dealt with the Syrophenician woman. I think I may have preached one or two myself. It's a worthy topic. Intolerance and xenophobia are not only insulting, but they also the cause of great harm. Whether it is the political rhetoric in this country or the horrific ways in which Syrian refugees are being treated by many European countries, treating other people as if they were less than human has devastating results. The story of Jesus' treatment of the Syrophenician woman and his ultimate change of heart are warning and instruction for life together in the human family.

It's a good topic for a sermon, and I want to note the point. But this morning I want to also look in a slightly different direction.

In the story of the Syrophenician woman we see what we might describe as a tired and grumpy Jesus who is trying to get away on vacation. He doesn't want anyone to know he's in Tyre. He doesn't want to be bothered. He's intentionally gone to a faraway beach. And he's irritated when the woman recognizes him and begs for his help. It's how the doctor must feel when a patient catches him out to dinner with his family and insists on asking the dining physician medical questions.

In the next story takes place closer to home. Jesus has returned from the region of Tyre. He has come back to the area of the Sea of Galilee. He's back to work, as it were. It's regular office hours. People bring Jesus a deaf man. Jesus takes the man to a private area and cures him. But then something curious happens. Jesus tells the man to tell no one. Why? In this story Jesus isn't on vacation. He is among his own people and seems to have no reluctance to heal the man.

Jesus doesn't call the man names. He heals him, but then he tells the man to keep it a secret. Why?

Well, whatever the reason, find in the Gospel that the more Jesus tells people to keep quiet, the more they proclaim his miracles. It's tempting to think that Jesus is just always dealing with contrary people. They won't leave him along on vacation. They won't do what he asks them to. And we know from many other stories that his followers often fail to grasp what he's up to. Sometimes when Jesus looks out at his followers he must want to pull his hair out.

There are sermons to be preached here, too. Jesus is more patient than his followers deserve. He's more patient with us than we deserve. He hangs in there with his disciples, even as he calls them people of little faith, and we can imagine him treating us the same way; rolling his eyes yet as patient as Job. Jesus' patience and faithfulness are worthy topics to reflect on.

But I'm still wondering, why did Jesus tell the man he healed to keep quiet? And why did people shout it out more loudly the more he told them to keep their mouths shut?

Let's imagine for a moment that we are living in the Roman Empire somewhere just either side of 70 CE. Maybe we're in Rome, maybe Antioch, or maybe even in the Galilee. The Jewish revolt in the Eastern provinces has captured the brutal attention of Rome. There are internal squabbles between Jews who were Christians and Jews who saw Christianity as a heresy. And now it is some thirty-five years since Jesus was crucified. At this point there are very few of us who were alive when Jesus was. We are still awaiting his return, his second coming, which we believe should have been long before now. And to top it all off the Roman Emperor Nero has recently made Christianity a capital offense. It has been anything but easy for our small churches. We're neither fish nor fowl. We're not part of the Jewish revolt. We're increasingly pushed out of the synagogues. And yet, we're Jews and like all Jews, we refuse to accept that the emperor is divine. So we exist in fragile communities existing on no more than a patient faith. And that faith is tested by our delicate circumstance, by the dimming memory of the days when Jesus lived, and by the continuing absence of his return.

What we do have, thank God, is what will one day be called the Gospel of Mark. In it we have stories of Jesus and the things he did. Most of us have nearly memorized the whole thing. We recite the stories. They give us comfort. They transport us to those days when Jesus and his disciples walked among us. The stories give us a feel for who he was. And most of all they gird up our faith because we see just how extraordinary he was. They assure us that our God remains faithful even as we wait and try to survive in hostile conditions.

And the conditions are hostile. Often we fear for our lives. We're careful. We sometimes tell the stories in private. But you know what our Gospel stories tell us the most? They tell us that no matter what hostility Jesus faced, whether he was healing and teaching in faraway places or nearer to home, the things he did were so extraordinary that they could not be kept secret. Wherever he went, people recognized him. His healings were so amazing and meaningful that people couldn't keep them to themselves. They told everyone. The excitement he created was unbelievable. Whenever he spoke huge crowds came. They would stay and listen, transfixed, even after all the food ran out.

He was never showy when he did things, and he spoke very plainly, too. He told the truth. What he said wasn't very complicated. But two things about what he said were striking. First, the truths he spoke often made the powerful angry. It was as if the things he said were so obvious that the people who didn't like them couldn't really argue with them. They tried to catch him in traps, but they couldn't. They were really mad that he acted as if poor people and sick people and deranged people were as good as they themselves were. The second thing that was

striking was that what he said was so obviously true that even when spoke them softly, they reverberated over the hills and valleys. One time he told his critics that if he didn't say the things he said, the very stones would cry out and say them.

These Gospel stories are important to us in these early days. It would be so easy to just give up. But when we recite them, we feel the power of their truth. We know we have to keep telling them. We know we could no more keep quiet or fail to recognize those truths than the people who walked with him. We recite the stories, and they come alive in us.

So, good friends, let us come back from imagining that we are first century Christians. But having imagined ourselves there maybe we have a better sense of how the Gospel sounded to the early church. It reminded them of the truths Jesus told, and it made it obvious why they couldn't possibly keep quiet even if they made Nero apoplectic. Jesus's compassion for the least and his plain spoken truths compelled the early church to cry them far and wide.

Maybe that's what they are supposed to do still, compel us to cry them far and wide. I don't know, but I wonder. What do you think? What do you think? Amen.