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Proverbs 22: 1 – 2, 8 – 9, 22 – 23
James 2: 1 – 10, (11 – 13) 14 – 17

Ps. 125
Mark 7: 24 – 37

Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it.

We have two healing stories in our Gospel today. In the first story, Jesus has retreated into Gentile territory, northwest of Galilee, along the Mediterranean coast of Phoenicia, in the region of Tyre and Sidon. Jesus is looking to get away from everyone and have some peace and quiet. Three chapters ago in the Gospel, Mark noted that people from this region were part of the huge crowds listening to Jesus and witnessing his miracles. So, two things are quite possible. First, that many of the folks from Tyre and Sidon went back home and told everyone about the things they witnessed Jesus doing and saying. Second, one or more of them may have offered Jesus a place to stay if ever he needed to get away. So, perhaps Jesus has accepted that offer.

No sooner does Jesus arrive, then a desperate mother, who *must* have heard the stories of him, comes bursting through the door. The unnamed Gentile woman verbally spars with Jesus, who seems rather impressed that she gets his message when his own disciples do not. His priorities are for the Jewish people, so Jesus attempts to put her off, referring to this distraught mother as a ‘dog.’ It’s in the diminutive form, so perhaps doggie, or puppy. Nonetheless, it’s harsh no matter how we care to parse it.

But this mother, willing to do anything it takes to heal her daughter, goes toe to toe with Jesus. She knows that this kind of give-and-take dialogue is about retorting with wit, and she does. ‘Okay, I’m a dog, lowest member of the household, fine, but still, dogs get all those scraps that children happen to drop off their plates. Let me have those.’ She reminds Jesus that she, too, is a member of God’s household, and Jesus essentially says, “Well done!” She helps Jesus reframe his understanding of his mission and purpose. So much so, that I think it is reflected in the arc of the storyline of the Gospel as Mark tells it.

In the previous chapter (Ch. 6), Mark tells about the feeding of the 5,000. It is in Jewish territory. Jesus takes the five loaves and two fish and provides for this Jewish crowd in such abundance, that afterwards, the disciples collect twelve basketfuls of the leftover pieces – the crumbs.

Immediately after talking to this woman and healing the deaf/mute man in the next story, Jesus is still presumably in Gentile territory. Mark’s geography is a little wonky, so it’s a bit ambiguous. As Ch. 8 opens, Jesus finds himself again surrounded by a huge crowd, presumably Gentile, this time numbering 4,000. Jesus expresses the same compassion that he did for the Jewish crowd. Essentially, Jesus repeats the feeding miracle for these Gentiles, this time retrieving seven baskets full of ‘crumbs.’ It’s like Jesus does a do-over, this time, moving out the tent pegs. It’s as if Jesus is saying, “Yes, God’s abundance DOES cover everyone, and with room to spare.”

This story of the Syrophoenician woman asking for the crumbs is *sandwiched* between the stories of the fishes and loaves. Last week, we talked about Jesus erasing the lines drawn between clean and unclean; that it’s the internals that count and not the externals. The arc of this storyline embodies

that very principle, with the faith and courage of this Gentile woman reminding Jesus of his own words and changing – opening up – his ministry.

Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it.

In all probability, the reason that the Syrophenician woman came bursting in to see Jesus was because she had heard people talk about the amazing things he had done and said. And in the story of the deaf/mute man, no matter what Jesus says, people can't stop talking about what has happened. And really, could any of us?

To be clear, Jesus doesn't come into this world to heal everyone, to be some sort of miraculous medical missionary, but rather to announce and establish God's Kingdom, God's deliverance. He cannot help himself though, from acting on the compassion he has for people in need. In Hebrew, the same word is used for both 'heal' and 'save.' It's the word 'yasha,' which actually means to deliver. One can be delivered from sickness or from sin. Yasha is the word from which the name Yeshua comes, meaning 'God saves,' God delivers. Yeshua, Joshua, Jesus.

After communion each Sunday, we have anointing with oil, laying on of hands and prayers for healing. Just to reassure you, I do not put my fingers in anyone's ears, and I don't ever spit on my fingers and put them in someone's mouth. Anyone is invited to ask for prayers on behalf of themselves or for someone or something else. Anyone is also invited to join in the laying on of hands, because that is a gift that many people have to offer.

My first experience with healing in the Episcopal church was in the large church in Jacksonville where I became an Episcopalian. In that service, it was referred to by the sacramental name of 'unction,' from the Latin word for anointing, *unguere*. Not only did it have a mysterious name, if you wanted to participate during the Offertory, you had to leave the sanctuary and go to the chapel, which had solid, heavy, wooden doors. All of which kept it a mystery and not terribly welcoming.

Several years later, as a parishioner in Dublin, GA, I felt this strong urge, not a desire so much as a push, to participate in the healing service. One Wednesday night a month, at the midweek service, Joel, the priest, was offering a healing service. I had no idea why I needed to be healed, but the push was there. So, before the service, the next time it was offered, I said to myself, and I guess to God, 'I don't understand why, and I don't really know what this healing stuff is about, but if it is made more understandable to me, less threatening, I'll go up.' Not five minutes later, Joel comes out and begins by saying, "Perhaps I should explain about the healing service..." Okay, okay. I'll go. And I believe that my grudging openness to God working through that healing with anointing and laying on of hands opened the door for me to be healed of some childhood demons that I hadn't even really realized were there. It wasn't easy and it wasn't overnight, but God was in the midst of all of it. This is why I believe first hand in the power of healing services and in the healings that I read about in Scripture. I don't know *how*. But I do know *who*. And this is why I tell you my story – or one of my stories – of healing. I could also tell you any number of stories from second or third hand – of people who have been healed – and I and they believe by God.

Healed doesn't always mean physically cured. We can be healed mentally, emotionally and spiritually. So, sometimes, healing doesn't look like what we hope it will. People – loved ones – still die. But that doesn't mean that they haven't been healed. I also believe that God has always used people

and medicine and technology to heal us. N. T. Wright says that healing in biblical times and even now can never be simply ‘a matter of correcting a few faults in the machine called the human body. It always was and is, and perhaps supremely so in Jesus’ actions, a sign of God’s love breaking into the painful and death-laden present world.’ He says it’s a sign, pointing to the Great Healing, when Jesus is finally revealed to the whole world, and “our present stammering praise is turned into full-hearted song.”

As people of faith, we need to talk about our experiences of God healing us and other people – and perhaps animals. “Ephphatha! Be open!” Jesus tells the deaf/mute man, and “immediately his ears were open and his tongue released.” So, what I’d like for us to do now is to spend a couple of minutes telling our stories of God’s healing in our lives. Find someone near you and pair up. We’ll take about 30 seconds of quiet to help remember moments when we have suspected, or perhaps known, that God has been involved in some sort of healing to come to the surface. We’ll take about two minutes each to tell our stories to each other. After all, how will others know what God has done for us unless we tell them? I’ll let you know when to switch...

(30 second pause) Ephphatha! Be open! ...

What was that experience like for you?

In the words of the Rev. Dr. Delmer L. Chilton, let us pray.

May God’s grace come to each of us and change us. May it loose our tongues so that we may speak explanations of difficult truths to one another. May it open our ears so that we may hear the truth when it is spoken to us in love. May it free our arms to embrace those in any need. May it strengthen our legs so that we can go where God is calling us. Most of all, may it heal our hearts so that we can invite all God’s children to the table of God’s love. Amen.

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