



TOUCH POINT

The Sigh – Touchpoint for September 4, 2024

Mark 7:24-37 (NRSVUE) The Syrophenician Woman's Faith

²⁴ 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, ²⁵ but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. ²⁶ Now the woman was a gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷ 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." ²⁸ But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." ²⁹ Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." ³⁰ And when she went home, she found the child lying on the bed and the demon gone.

Jesus Cures a Deaf Man

³¹ Then he returned from the region of Tyre and went by way of Sidon toward the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. ³² They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech, and they begged him to lay his hand on him. ³³ He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. ³⁴ Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." ³⁵ And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. ³⁶ Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one, but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. ³⁷ They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."

Grace and peace to you from the Mystery in whom we live and move, and have our being.

Jesus presented what is considered to be the most revolutionary statement in the New Testament. He is telling a timeless religious culture that everything we've been doing for a very long time has been inside out. Jesus was saying that no matter how perfect your outward performance, it can never cover for the wickedness in your heart.

Until these subversive words from Jesus, a person's individual and communal religious life was centered on outward religious duty. He called some of them hypocrites because they were actors. Their false selves originated from the choices of their hearts. He was not condemning the outward observances, he was saying if there exists enmity, bitterness, grudges and pride, they can't cover for the heart's intentions. Jesus quite specifically outlines the result of this behavior in the form of evil deeds. These words were the English translations, and they don't do justice to what the people of that time were hearing. Nor does it truly unpack the nuances we need to hear from the Greek. I will touch on a couple of those later.

I really want to get to the woman Jesus called a dog, but I want to stay on this heart issue just a little bit longer. I can't help but think about many of my dear spiritual directees over the last thirty years, who were high profile people in businesses, religion and nonprofits. Some suffered silently in shame and guilt. They never had to face their personal hypocrisy because their institutions look the other way. These were organizations that did good work but were dependent upon the large donations and the work of these vital few. No one asked how these people were doing personally. They appeared to be strong family people with wisdom for the workers. They covered their own deceitfulness with a protective wall of charitable clout.

Here we find Jesus is speaking directly to inauthentic people and the institutions who get in bed with them in order to maintain ministerial relevance. I'm not saying people should be excommunicated or fired for deeds of self-protection; I'm saying Jesus's revolutionary words to the Jewish and gentile people are relevant for us as well, and could serve to heal both the perpetrators and the religious accomplices. It is these high-minded institutions that perpetuate leader-worship. The individuals these people serve look up to their leaders and help to balance them on their pedestals. Their activities are admirable. We see it in churches large and small every Sunday.

But check the back row of any church and you may find an individual who is willing to eat the breadcrumbs... people who consider themselves lesser than those who are practicing well.

Perhaps Jesus isn't sitting in one of the chairs up front. Perhaps he is in the back row asking those individuals deep within their hearts, "Why are you acting like a little puppy?" Much like the woman who begged for Jesus's help, those in the back row are asking God for help. I wouldn't think calling her a dog would help her! What was he thinking?

Jesus, however, did not use the same word when referring to the woman that was commonly used for 'dog' in those times.

Prior to this moment, the Greek word used for dog was *Kyo-ohn*, which appears in other Bible stories and is quite similar to how we would use the term "bitch" today. It is degrading and demeaning. It was used to refer to a shameless and audacious woman, most often a gentile woman such as this. Here was a gentile woman caught in crossing both the Jew and the Gentile cultures. Maybe Jesus's use of the word 'dog' was genius.

Jesus uses a different word for dog in addressing her. The word in Greek is *Kynarion*, which means puppy. A little puppy. Jesus is calling her a puppy. She was a gentile woman who was an entirely different type of dog. The word for dog she was used to hearing was *Kyo-ohn*, a word of contempt. To Jesus, she was *Kynarion*. She was coming as a neglected puppy.

Again, with that word, Jesus is transforming a cultural tradition, those who viewed gentiles – and particularly gentile women – as beastly hounds. A puppy cannot be mistaken for a dangerous hound, it merely waits for the crumbs and the crumbs are enough. The spiritually hungry or starving individual cannot fight to change a culture, or wait for a place at the table; it simply waits for the breadcrumbs to fall. Perhaps someone like Jesus arrived to meet them, touch them, and see them at their relegated place under the table.

Maybe Jesus is saying to the woman, "Why do you come by way of the floor?" In other words, "Why do you sit in the back row awaiting life-giving breadcrumbs?"

The rebellious Jesus stirred up what John Lewis called "good trouble." In one fell swoop he is dispensing with the clean and unclean divisions. He is eliminating the distance created between those who achieve a place at the table of hypocrisy and those who come by way of the floor.

To those who remain standing to retain importance, heels dug in and questioning his words, Jesus refers to as thieves or in Greek, *Kleptes*.

William Barclay describes *kleptes* as "a mean, deceitful, dishonorable pilferer, without even the redeeming quality of a certain audacious gallantry that a brigand (outlaw) must have."

It's easy to perceive Jesus as showing favoritism to one group or another, but let me offer another idea: Jesus ultimately wanted people to be free of their physical, emotional, and spiritual shackles. His message is freedom to anyone who would awaken to their hearts' intent. It is only an insult to someone who wants to

maintain their self-perceptions. Whether they be of power and self-protection or self-consciousness and low esteem, either point of view places self as the center of truth.

Whether it be a dog or a Pharisee, a deaf and silent person or a preacher, since the time of Egypt to Carefree, Arizona today, Jesus is looking up to heaven and sighing for his people who need freedom.

When Jesus encounters the man whose tongue was bound, and hearing was gone Jesus stuck his fingers in his ears and placed the healing properties of spittle on his tongue and "... looked up into heaven, and sighed, and said to him, "Ephphatha!" which means, "Be opened!" And his ears were opened, and the bond which held his tongue was loosed, and he spoke correctly."

Jesus sighs for his people.

Sighing demonstrated Jesus's deep empathy and emotion for this man who was unable to hear or speak. This sigh is *stamos* in Greek and is defined as a groan, a sigh, a deep grief. It's used in two other places in scripture. When Moses was standing on Holy Ground and God said, "I have certainly seen the oppression of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their groaning, and I have come down to rescue them" and in Romans 8:26 when Paul writes, "Now in the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know what to pray for as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words."

Our audible sighs are joined by Spirit's inaudible sighs for us.

After the sigh Jesus looks up into heaven. What does this mean? To me, it means that heaven is indeed a place where there is freedom, even more evidence that heaven is not a place we go, but is with us right now. Heaven is, as Jesus said, "at hand."

"Ephphatha!" Be opened he sighed, and it was... and all the windows of his soul's senses were thrown wide open.

Jesus asks, "Why do you come by way of the floor? Why do you come by way of outward duty?"

"Ephphatha!" Be opened!

Amen

Opening Songs

Be Still

(The London Fox Taizé Choir)

Be still, know that I am God

Calm Me, Lord

(Margaret Rizza)

Calm me Lord as you calmed the storm. Still me Lord, keep me from harm.
Let all the tumult within me cease. Enfold me Lord, in your peace.

Bible Passage

(A passage takes us from one place to another)

Touchpoint

(Where God's story touches our life story)

Healer of Our Every Ill

(Marty Haugen)

Healer of our every ill, light of each tomorrow.
Give us peace beyond our fear, and hope beyond our sorrow.
You who know our fears and sadness. Grace us with your peace and gladness.
Spirit of all comfort, fill our hearts. *Refrain*
In the pain and joy beholding, how your grace is still unfolding
Give us all your vision God of love. *Refrain*

The Meal

The Lord's Prayer

(Monastery Choir of St. John of San Francisco)

Benediction

Gaelic Blessing/Deep Peace

(John Rutter, The Cambridge Singers)

Deep peace of the running wave to you. Deep peace of the flowing air to you.
Deep peace of the quiet earth to you. Deep peace of the shining stars to you.
Deep peace of the gentle night to you. Moon and stars pour their healing light on you.
Deep peace of Christ, of Christ the light of the world to you.
Deep peace of Christ to you.