The Voices Outside the Walls

If you’ve never heard me preach on this gospel passage before, it’s because it comes up in the lectionary on the first Sunday after Labor Day, the Sunday that for me, as a former church educator, is usually one of the most fun days of the year, a day of celebration as we welcome folks back from summer journeys, as we start a new year of Sunday school with the kids, a day when we hope to welcome new folks to our worship service as we plan for an exciting, faith-filled year ahead. Then we have this very difficult gospel story where Jesus shows up, at least at first, in a not very flattering light, a story where he seems to want to close the door in a woman’s face, on a day when we are trying to open our doors as wide as we can. It’s one of those days when I want to through the lectionary that often guides what scriptures I use on any given Sunday out the window and preach on something else instead.

But then, as I thought more about it, it seemed to me that maybe today is exactly the right day for us to hear this passage. It helps us to move beyond our comfort zones, beyond the walls behind which we feel safe, and listen to voices we have never heard before, maybe because they have never spoken loudly enough for us to hear. This passage invites us, as Jesus invited the deaf and mute man, to “be opened”.

As we begin, Jesus has already moved from his comfortable home territory in Galilee to the region of Tyre. Tyre is not so far away physically, but it’s land mostly occupied by Gentiles instead of Jews like Jesus, the home of a people who have traditionally been rivals of the Jews. Mark tells us Jesus to a place where no one would know he was there, presumably to take a break from the crowds that were following him around after the feeding of the 5000. Yet somehow the woman – whose name we never know – finds him and throws himself at his feet, asking him to heal her daughter, who has a demon.

This woman was a Syro-phoenician, we are told, one of those hereditary almost-enemies of the Jews. She was a woman. She was a mother. We never learn more about her, but we meet her every day. Barbara Lundblad, in a sermon that is well worth listening to if you want to check it out, says that even though this story happened in Jesus’ time, she is not past-tense. She is the Palestinian mother of a sick child who will wait for hours to get through the Israeli checkpoints to get her child the medical care she needs. She is the African American woman praying that her son will come home safely. She is a poor woman, undocumented, afraid to take her daughter to the emergency room. She is the mother of a child with autism who has not been invited to this year’s Thanksgiving dinner again because her child might have a melt down.

In many places, she is a person who has no voice – or at least not a voice that anyone will listen to. She is the one who speaks from outside the walls we build around ourselves to define who is acceptable, the one who speaks from a place outside the halls of power. She is, after all, a woman. She is, after all, from a people that Jews look down on. And yet, in her love for her child, in her desperation, she dares to go to this Jewish healer in the hope that he, at last, might be the one who can make a difference. When you’re desperate enough, you don’t care about the rules or custom or propriety or anything. You just go where ever you can get help.

Jesus’ words to her are high on the list of things I wish Jesus had never said. They show Jesus at his human worst – responding from a place of tiredness with words showing the worst side of his culture and time.They are not what you would expect from the son of the God of steadfast, self-giving love. His words are harsh. They are rejecting. They are not kind. They are not welcoming. He tells her “let the children be fed first – it’s not fair to take their food and throw it to the dogs.” At that point, if it were me I might either throw whatever food was in front of him in Jesus’ face or just give up and go away in tears.

But the woman finds her voice, a voice that speaks truth in the face of injustice, and does not flinch in the face of power. She doesn’t yell or cry. She simply answers. Maybe as she answers she is remembering the story she had heard, that the children of Israel had already been fed, at a feast that fed 5000 people, with twelve baskets of leftovers. “Sir,”she says, even the dogs get to eat the children’s crumbs.”

And right here, at this moment, is a turning point in Mark’s gospel. It is a moment when Jesus literally hears a different voice, a woman’s voice, a gentile’s voice, and because of that voice, turns to face in a new direction and do a new thing. He turns from facing inside to what he knows to facing outside to those beyond the walls. He hears a voice that doesn’t come from his own people, but from another people, and recognizes that the wall between inside and outside isn’t as high as he had thought. He heals the woman’s child.

But he doesn’t stop there. He goes on and reaches out to another person in Gentile territory, another person whose voice has never been heard, a man who is both deaf and dumb. “Be opened”, Jesus says, and the man can speak. He has been opened in one way as Jesus was opened in another.

Then, he goes on and hosts another miraculous meal, this time for four thousand people. But look at the left-overs – not twelve baskets full, one for each of the twelve tribes of Israel, but seven baskets, a number of completeness, a number that encompasses every nation in the world.

As we look at the woman, as we look at Jesus, as we listen to this story and are opened ourselves, it becomes clear why this is a good story for us to hear where we are this morning, as we welcome and are welcomed at the beginning of a new season in this church. Some among us are or have been the woman who was shushed or disrespected, some among us are or have been the man who never had a voice. Others among us are those who have turned a deaf ear to voices beyond our walls that would take us across barriers and beyond our comfort zones. Most of us, at one time or another, have been both the ones silenced and the ones who would not listen. To all of us this morning, Jesus says, “Be opened.” Be opened to speak your truth. Be opened to hear a new word and see a new way. Be opened to move beyond the walls of culture and practice, of race and ability to form new relationships and understand that God’s grace is for all and that God’s desire is for all God’s children to be fed in body and in spirit.

Hear God’s invitation to our church as well to be opened, to open our doors and our hearts to all kinds of people, to open our ears to hear the voices that haven’t felt comfortable inside these walls, to listen to what they are saying and lay aside our own preconceptions and allow ourselves to be changed.

Speak, listen, and be opened to God’s Spirit. Amen.