

What's In Your Ears

Mark 7:24-37
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First Presbyterian Church
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A farmer encountered a little girl lost in his meadow one day. The farmer said to her, "Don't cry; I'll take you home."

The little child snuggled up to him with a smile and said, "I knew you would; I was waiting for you."

"Waiting for me?" said the farmer. "What made you think I was coming?"

"I was praying you would," she said.

"Praying? When I first heard you, you were saying A-B-C-D-E-F-G. What was that for?"

She looked up again and said, "I'm just a little girl. I was praying all the letters of the alphabet and letting God put them together the way he wanted to. He knows I was lost, and he knows how to put them together better than I do."

Having faith that God can put things together better than we can – the world could use more of that; we could use more of that!

In today's New Testament lesson, we have two people who need God to put things right in their world – one, a Gentile, a mother, an outsider whose daughter is being tormented by forces beyond her control. And the other a group of Jews whose friend is deaf and mute and in need of a miracle.

Here we see two different approaches to using our faith to improve our lot in life. Let's look at the non-Jewish mother first, the Gentile. For years, she has watched her daughter suffer under an "unclean spirit."

We don't know what had control of her daughter, but we can imagine. We can imagine that it might be like having a child who's addicted to drugs, or a brother who's stuck in a dead-end career, or a spouse who won't make healthy choices, or a loved one for whom age and disease is taking a terrible, tragic toll, and you just don't know what more you can possibly do to make a difference.

Well, have you ever heard about Jesus and the power of faith? The Gentile woman had. Mark tells us that when Jesus came by, she "immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. ... She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter."

And Jesus 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." Wow! That's pretty discouraging, isn't it? That's as discouraging as seeing a loved one struggle and suffer year-after-year with no hope in sight.

Now it should be noted that the word for “dogs” that Jesus used was really more like the word for “puppies,” the household fur-babies. Jesus is saying to the woman I was sent to the “lost sheep of Israel” – the word “sheep” is also not very flattering – and you want to step in line ahead of them?

We don’t know why Jesus said this. But we do know how the woman responded. She responded with honesty, knowing that she needs the Lord’s help; in faith, knowing his desire to heal and to save, and in humility, willing to persevere in the face of hopelessness.

When Jesus said I was sent first and foremost to help the Jewish faithful, God’s chosen people, the woman acknowledged how unworthy she was while still clinging to her faith in the Lord. “Sir,” she said, “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.”

Here, Jesus shows us that when we come to him in honesty about our true needs, with faith in his desire and ability to help, and in humble perseverance regardless of how hopeless things seem, Jesus will meet us in our need and deliver us from that which torments us.

Sometimes Jesus brings a cure and a new start, other times he brings guidance and hope, and always he brings comfort and peace. What we will get and why we get it, we don’t know. But we do know that Jesus is there for us and for all people – if we’re open to what Jesus wants for us.

Being open to the Lord. That’s what the Jewish faithful of Jesus’ time needed most. Sadly, many of them were not open to what Jesus had to offer. They were too set in their ways to see and appreciate all that Jesus brings.

So, Jesus uses his encounter with the deaf mute to show them who he is and what he desires of them, for us.

The deaf mute could neither hear what Jesus had to say nor respond to it. Isn’t that too often the way it is with us. Sometimes we’re just not listening to the Lord, given all the clamor of the world around us.

Other times we hear the Lord speaking to us, but fail to act on it, we can’t or won’t give voice to his presence in our lives, through who we are being, the choices we are making.

We’re like the Nicholas Cage character in a 2001 movie titled “Captain Corelli’s Mandolin,” which was set in Greece. One day the Nicholas Cage character comes to the village doctor complaining that he cannot hear.

The doctor finds a dried pea stuck in the man’s ear; it had been there for years. Of course, the doctor removes the pea and the man is cured.

Later, he returns to the doctor, overwhelmed with the sounds of life – the bickering and the noise and all the hassle. He can hardly stand it. “Please,” he begs, “put the pea back in my ear?”

“Put the pea back in my ear.” Sometimes we can’t hear what the Lord has to say amid all the noise around us. Other times, we hear the Lord speaking to us but act like we don’t; we refuse to listen. And still, Jesus is there for us.

The man brought to Jesus is both deaf and mute, but this doesn’t mean Jesus can’t reach him. Taking the man aside in private, Jesus puts his fingers into the man’s ears, then he spits and touches the man’s tongue. Why would Jesus do this?

I mean, for the Gentile woman he merely declares that her daughter is free of the demon, and it is done. Why make a showing of it in curing the deaf mute?

Well, it’s because the man was deaf and mute. The only way Jesus could reach him was through sign language, so to speak. When Jesus put his fingers into the man’s ears, the man knew Jesus was there to help him hear. When he spat and touched the man’s tongue – this was the standard practice of the magical healers at the time of Jesus, so the man knew he was being given the power to speak.

Even when we’re not listening to the Lord, and even when we hear and fail to act, Jesus finds a way to reach us, Jesus finds a way to touch us with his healing, transformative, freeing power. He never gives up on us.

So, ask yourself, what is getting in the way of you hearing Jesus? What keeps you from acting on what you hear, what you hear Jesus saying to you in your heart of hearts?

This world is full of barriers that block us from receiving what the Lord wants for us, and giving of ourselves as the Lord would have us give. What are those barriers for you? Do you even know?

Whatever they are, the Lord can break through, the Lord will break through and touch you with his healing, guide you to a place of renewal and new life, and free you from despair.

When we come before the Lord in honesty about our true need, with faith in his desire and ability to help, and in humble perseverance regardless of how hopeless things seem, Jesus will meet us in our need and free us from that which torments us and holds us captive.

Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy and gracious God, we are all in need of healing. Some of us have sick bodies, others have sick souls, minds or spirits.

We need a word or a touch from the Great Physician, for we are incapable of making ourselves well. We are powerless over the demons that beset us.

Anger, worry and fear grip our hearts. Depression and anxiety steal our joy, and disease robs us of vitality. Circumstances beyond our control plant seeds of doubt.

Look upon us with mercy and compassion and hear us as we lift up in prayer those in need of your healing touch. And for all your children, Lord, for all of us, we pray to receive in our hearts and minds your words of hope and reassurance, that we might faithfully trust in your healing and guiding presence.

We pray all this in your name, praying together the prayer that you taught us, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.