

*Jesus Changes His Mind and Other Unexpected Turns in the Story*

A Sermon on Mark 7:24-37 by the Rev. Philip Major

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I love the Gospel of Mark. Mark's Gospel is full of good news of the work of God in the world. Mark is full of unexpected, and sometimes humorous, turns in the story. Mark is direct. Mark tells what is most important about Jesus. Today's passage from Mark 7 is an example. Mark gets right to the point as the story takes some unexpected turns.

Let's remember a passage from Mark that we don't get to hear very often. In chapter 2, verse 22, Jesus said, "No one puts new wine into old wineskins. If she does, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined." In the Gospel of Mark, this is the first big idea about Jesus and God; through the person of Christ Jesus God is doing something completely new in the world. We cannot expect God's work to fit into our old ways of doing things. This verse is the foundation for the entire first half of the Gospel of Mark.

Today, in chapter 7, *Jesus set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there.* Let's notice a couple of important details. The first is that Jesus had been teaching and doing his ministry in the northern region of Israel, up near the Sea of Galilee. As far as the priests and bishops and other religious people were concerned, Galilee was considered to be the wrong side of the railroad tracks, the not so good neighborhood. But Galilee was still part of the Jewish homeland. In today's passage Jesus travelled further north, into the region of Tyre and Sidon. This is the land of the Phoenicians.

The Phoenicians were gentiles, in other words, they weren't Jewish. But even more important, the Phoenicians were more or less the native people of the region. Way back in ancient history, something like 1500 years before Jesus' time, when the people of Israel were led by Moses and Joshua into the promised land, some parts of that land were already occupied.

You and I are familiar with this kind of story because it's similar to what happened with most of our ancestors when they came to this place they called 'The New World'. Large parts of America were already occupied by native peoples who had lived here for thousands of years.

Jesus' people haven't been very happy about the presence of the Phoenicians for about 1500 years by the time Jesus travels there. In Jesus' time the relationship between the Jews and the Phoenicians was getting worse, because the Phoenicians were wealthier, and they lived in big cities. The Jews of Galilee were relatively poor farmers. They sold their produce to the Phoenicians.

Jesus has taken a little side trip into Phoenecia because he needs to get some rest. For months he has been travelling through Israel, often surrounded by large crowds of people. Large crowds are following him because, unlike the religious and political leaders, Jesus is actually taking care of the people. He has been healing many sick and disabled people and spreading the good news of God's love and justice. Jesus fed a group of five thousand people, and a few verses after today's passage he will feed another four thousand hungry people. It's a good thing to do, but Jesus is exhausted.

So Jesus goes to Phoenecia because he knows the crowds of poor Jewish people from Galilee will not follow him all the way up there. *Yet he could not escape notice. A Phoenician woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit had somehow heard about him.* Jesus had been staying in secret, perhaps in the house of Jewish family. But this woman barged into the house, *came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin.* This is a big problem, because, as a Gentile, she is considered to be unclean, and should not even be in the house. We might be surprised at these rules. Let's consider the way we sometimes have similar feelings and rules. There are times when we don't want certain people coming into our homes.

*This foreign woman begged Jesus to cast the demon out of her daughter. Jesus 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."* This sounds like a savage insult, and it is! Yes, Jesus, our favorite person ever, has just told this foreign woman that she is 'a dog'. You and I expect Jesus to be a universalist, that is, to treat everyone equally, but Jesus doesn't seem to be a universalist. Jesus' first and foremost concern is to bring God's good news to the Jews, and to care for the people of Israel, and especially for the poor people of Israel. There are many poor people in Israel. Israel is a small, not especially powerful nation, surrounded by much wealthier, more powerful nations. Israel is like El Salvador or Latvia. You and I are slightly shocked at his words, because Jesus has healed plenty of Gentiles. For some combination of reasons, he is drawing some sort of line when this woman asks for his help.

*But then the foreign lady answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."* Now we come to the biggest, unexpected turn in the story: Jesus changes his mind. Jesus loses an

argument. Not only that, Jesus loses an argument to a foreigner, a woman. Jesus refused her, using a clever turn of phrase: *Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.* She overturns his clever logic with words of equal power: *Why of course sir, but even the dogs are permitted to eat the crumbs that fall from the children's table.*

You and I might be uncomfortable with the entire exchange, but our comfort is not the point. The point is that, when confronted with the truth and with the true needs of God's people, even Jesus changes his mind. One of my favorite New Testament experts, PHEME PERKINS, points out that Jesus is showing us the importance of losing an argument. Jesus shows us that part of being a follower of Christ, including for religious leaders, is to get comfortable with losing arguments and changing our minds.

In response, Jesus *said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter."* Let's notice that Jesus does not say, "Because of your faith I've changed my mind. Your daughter has been cured." Jesus does not say that. The unclean, foreign lady convinced Jesus to change his mind by her words!

Words are going to be very important in the next story as well. After a short amount of rest, Jesus heads back towards Galilee, a journey of a few days. It's not exactly clear from the passage whether this next story happens in a community of Jews or Gentiles. But somewhere in that northern region *a group of people brought a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. Jesus 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 spoke to him in Aramaic, "Ephphatha," which means, "Be opened." And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.*

*Then Jesus ordered the man and his friends to tell no one.* This is one of the humorous parts. It's clearly wishful thinking on Jesus' part, because this man used to be deaf. Of course the man is going to run around and tell all of his friends. And then they are going to ask, "What happened?" So the man who was healed said, *"He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."* *And the people of that region were astounded beyond measure.* Over and over again in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus tells people to not tell anyone. The enormous crowds of people show, in a humorous way, that this is one instruction the people are definitely not following.

Let's notice one or two more details. This account of the healing of this particular deaf man is found only in Mark. In the Gospel of Mark, hearing and understanding and speaking are especially important. Jesus shares the good news with anyone who will listen, and large crowds of people follow him through the countryside, because they understand he is offering something that is lifegiving. And the crowds of people get to be larger and larger, and Jesus' reputation spreads throughout the land, because they are spreading the good news of the Messiah. The man who used to be deaf is just the latest example of common people preaching the good news of the Messiah.

On the other hand, the people we expect to understand, do not understand what Jesus' offers. We expect the disciples will understand; they are with Jesus, day in and day out. They might be listening, but they are not understanding. They are afraid. They should be like the anonymous deaf man, able to preach the good news they have seen and heard. But when they do get the chance to speak, such as in the Transfiguration they are fearful and clueless. The disciples rely on old traditions to try to express something that is completely new.

The religious authorities are even worse. They know the scriptures. They know more than anyone else about the events and ideas that have led to the coming of the Messiah. The prophet Isaiah had told of the coming of a new age, the age of the Messiah. Isaiah had foretold that the coming of the Messiah would be accompanied by the healing of those who were possessed by demons, and the crippled, and the blind, and the deaf. The priests and bishops are the people who know the book of Isaiah. They read it. They preach it. The religious leaders should understand, but they don't. Yet they are unwilling to let their minds be changed by what they have seen and heard. So they conspire to get rid of Jesus.

How about you and me? Have we heard and been responsive to what Jesus is offering us? Are we following Jesus' example? Are we able to hear a new truth? Do we care enough about the truth that we are willing to lose the argument? Are we willing to let our minds and our lives be changed?