

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. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. 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.” But she answered him, “Sir, 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.” So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He 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 said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, “He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.”

The day the gospel went to the dogs was the day it came to us. Mark’s Jesus in this reading is a rebellious Jewish rabbi among Gentiles. The last time Jesus was in Gentile territory, he sent a herd of pigs plunging to their deaths in the Galilee. Understandably upset, the locals asked him to leave.

Now he’s in “the region of Tyre,” which is more openly hostile territory. In fact, Mark’s Gospel was written during the Great Jewish revolt against Rome when Tyrions were busy killing or imprisoning Jews.

That may explain why Jesus wanted no one to recognize him and why he got a bit crunchy with the Syrophenician woman. Even so, his insult became a pivot point in his ministry. Just before this reading, Jesus defended his disciples from criticism by some of the Judean elites who said they were not following “the tradition of the elders” because they ate without washing their hands properly.

His teaching about what makes a person clean or unclean radically challenged strict social boundaries. Now, a Syrophenician woman is challenging Jesus to practice what he has just preached. According to “the tradition of the elders,” she is considered unclean.

She's a Greek woman with the audacity to disturb the privacy of a Jewish man to beg him to free her daughter from an unclean spirit.

Yet, despite her respectful humility, Jesus insults her. "First, let the children be fully fed; for it is not a good thing to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." People have tried for centuries to clean up this cheap shot, but instead of trying to excuse it or explain it away, we can learn from what the Syrophenician woman did.

Rather than being shaken by his comment, she uses it to recast her request. "Yes, Sir," she says, "and the dogs under the table eat from the children's crumbs."

Now, up to this point, Jesus has been unwavering in his purpose. He's no universal handyman sent to help everyone he chances to meet. He has been crystal clear that he was bringing the reign of God to the children of Israel. And then they – the obedient and renewed children – *they* would go out and bring the nations into the fold.

And now there's a pagan woman at his feet. Yes, let the children eat first, she implies. She is not asking to be first; she wants only one gift from among the many that she sees Jesus bringing to the children of Israel.

She is concerned for someone other than herself and asks only for her daughter's well-being. She is willing to become lesser to make that come to pass. Her persistence and her humility align with the Divine desire for wholeness, releasing God's life-giving power.

And her daughter is healed. The distance between Jesus and the girl is nothing in the space of her complete openness to God's life-affirming Spirit.

Whether or not she imagines *herself* to be worthy of God's attention, she is convinced that her daughter is worth all the hope and trust that she is putting in the reputation of this itinerate Jewish rabbi. She is willing, in short, to act on her faith.

Now, for Jesus and for Jews, faith is less about believing in some statements and more about trusting in some *one*; trusting a relationship. The Hebrew word often used for faith is *emunah* and it implies faithfulness; trust expressed in words and actions that give life to a relationship with God. That is precisely the kind of behavior that Jesus has been expecting from his Jewish followers.

Imagine his surprise at this pagan woman who crossed gender, social, economic and religious barriers – boundaries that separate “clean” from “unclean” according to “the tradition of the elders” – so that she could faithfully act with humility on behalf of a loved one.

She changes Jesus forever.

God’s promises to the Jews are still valid, but Jesus can now see that God’s inbreaking kingdom will spill beyond all human cultural and religious boundaries, even while many of the people he has come to feed *first* are refusing him. When I was in the consulting business, my partners and I referred to this teaching moment as finding the doors that open and relaxing about those that close.

The awareness-expanding moment Jesus had with this woman is still fresh when he meets a man who has a speech impediment.

Still in Gentile territory, Jesus encounters a crowd that does not understand the nature of his healing. Their intentions are good, but they expect a dazzling display of supernatural power rather than a healing movement of the Spirit. And so, Jesus takes the man they have brought away from the crowd.

Jesus puts his fingers into the man’s ears, changing the flow of attention. The man relaxes his struggle to make sense of the sounds coming from outside through an entry that is closed. He turns his awareness inward toward his heart, his spiritual center, where people connect to the Divine source.

Jesus spits on his hand in a physical gesture that symbolizes the Spirit brought alive in Jesus at his baptism. By touching the man’s tongue, the two are in communion with each other’s interiors. Jesus looks to heaven, a gesture that acknowledges the constant and ever-present flow of God’s spirit into creation.

With a simple sigh, the release of breath, Jesus unites the spiritual center of the man with the spiritual center of the Son of God who is filled with the Holy Spirit. He opens the man to God through his own openness to God. Only then does he speak.

“Ephphatha,” Jesus says in Aramaic. “Be opened.” Now, while the word seems exotic our ears, Jesus is speaking a word in his first language. Other healers of the day are using unfamiliar words as charms to magically cure physical ailments. Jesus is doing something

different; something that involves deep interiors hidden from physical sight.

And so, he says in common, everyday language, simply: “Be opened.” By experiencing unity with Jesus the Anointed, the man’s tongue becomes unknotted enough for him to return to a fuller participation in the life of his community.

And *that’s* the actual miracle.

For first-century Jews, miracles were not like pagan magic, although both might involve supernatural power. In the Jewish mind, miracles entailed empathy and relied on the spirit of the person performing them. Miracles were not intended to provide evidence of God’s existence; they had a purpose. Miracles made people whole. Glorified the Divine. Taught. Changed perspectives.

Miracles rely on relationships. And relationships thrive on faithful action, whether the action is trusting a teacher or opening your heart to God.

Let me tell you a story; a Jewish legend about a baker and a synagogue sexton – that’s a custodian of sorts. At Shabbat worship, one evening, the rabbi said something that caught the baker’s attention. “In the ancient days of the Jerusalem Temple,” the rabbi said, “12 loaves of bread were prepared as an offering for God on every Shabbat and placed in the holiest place in the Temple.”

Inspired and excited to find something he could do for the synagogue, the baker made 12 loaves on the very next Friday morning. As soon as they came out of the oven, he carried the loaves to the sanctuary, put them in the ark, and left with a huge smile and a grateful heart.

A few minutes later, the sexton came to sweep the sanctuary floor. He paused for a moment. “God,” he prayed, “I love working in your holy space, but you know that I have so very little. My children are so hungry, and I need a miracle.”

Returning to his chores, he was suddenly overwhelmed by the smell of fresh-baked bread. Opening the doors of the ark, he found the loaves still hot from the oven. “Thank you, God,” he cried, “and enough to feed my family for a week! It’s a miracle!” And so, he also left the synagogue with a smile and a grateful heart.

The next morning, the baker went to Shabbat services and as he watched, the rabbi opened the ark for the Torah. The bread was gone. God had accepted his gift! A miracle! His joy and thankfulness overflowed.

The next Friday, he baked 12 more and, sure enough, they too were gone the next morning. After his prayers on that same Friday, the sexton again found 12 piping hot loaves to feed his family. He carried them home with a heart filled with joy and gratitude.

This pattern continued for several weeks. Until, one morning, the inevitable happened.

On one unusually busy Friday morning, the baker was a few minutes late. Just after putting the loaves in the ark, the baker saw the sexton and the sexton saw him. In a flash, they both knew what had been going on. There had been no miracles at all.

Or more accurately, there had been no magic at all. Because miracles did happen for both men. And for their families. And for their synagogue. And for the community.

Some miracles do defy science. Most miracles happen, you see, when we act on our faith; when we live to our highest principles; when we listen to a voice more sacred than our own saying: “Be opened.” If we are still too hard of hearing to receive what Jesus teaches, the obstruction may be in our hearts not in the teaching.

By acting on our trust in God, we can bring about changes that will astonish and uplift the people around us. And when God’s heaven comes into its fullness among us, the stammerings of our partial perspectives will melt in whole and full-throated songs of joy and gratitude.

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