

Mark 7: 24-37 Year B

Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret. In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an unclean spirit came and fell at his feet. The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter. First let the children eat all they want,” he told her, “for it is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to their dogs.” “Yes, Lord,” she replied, “but even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” Then he told her, “For such a reply, you may go; the unclean spirit has left your daughter.” She went home and found her child lying on the bed, perfectly well.”

Then Jesus left the vicinity of Tyre and went through Sidon, down to the Sea of Galilee, and into the region of the Decapolis. There some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk, and they begged him to place his hand on the man. After he took him aside, away from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers into the man’s ears. Then he spit and touched the man’s tongue. He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, “Ephphatha!” (which means, “Be opened!”). At this, the man’s ears were opened, his tongue was loosened, and he began to speak plainly. Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone. But the more he did so, the more they kept talking about it. People were overwhelmed with amazement. “He has done everything well,” they said. “He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.”

In Psalm 146, the psalmist writes that the Lord God upholds the cause of the oppressed, gives food to the hungry, gives sight to the blind, and lifts up those who are bowed down. The Gospels tell us that Jesus has been doing these things: He’s upheld the cause of the oppressed—indeed he stood up for a woman accused of adultery, someone the Jewish leadership was prepared to stone to death; Jesus has fed five thousand hungry people on a mountainside above the Sea of Galilee; he’s lifted up a man bowed down by a crippling disease and told him, “Pick up your mat and walk!”; now Jesus has healed a woman’s daughter from demons and given the gift of speech to a man who has never known it—ever.

Lots of folks saw these signs and they believed—on the spot—that Jesus was the Messiah, sent by God. They believed, they followed Jesus and took his teaching into their hearts, and they spread the word that God had come to walk among them. But not all believed.

It would be like two Episcopal churches, built side by side in a town. One is full of devoted parishioners, who come every single Sunday, give faithfully of their time, money, and talents, who attend the adult Christian education offerings, who have completed four years of EFM, and who carry their piety out into their lives outside these doors. The other church has a smattering of curious but uneducated attendees. Many of them are occasional, barely dedicated Christians. We jokingly call them the Christmas and Easter Christians.

They are the folks who attend church as an afterthought, perhaps when the weather is ugly and there’s nothing else to do on a Sunday morning.

So, Jesus walks up on the chancel at each of these two churches and starts doing all sorts of wonderful and marvelous things—miracles! The church full of devout Christians—we'd expect *them* to pick up on the signs and recognize the Jesus instantly. But they don't! They say to themselves, "Gee, I wonder why that fellow was putting his fingers in the mans ears and spitting on his tongue. Why not skip the spit and just take him to an Audiologist or a Speech-Language pathologist? They would be the ones to say to Jesus, "If you're the Messiah, then prove it." As if Jesus wasn't busy doing so already.

And then you turn and look at the other folks, the casual, barely-there Christians, and *they get it!* They have recognized Jesus and they are dancing and singing with joy. They don't need any more proof than what is healing them and lifting them up and advocating for justice and feeding the needy right before their eyes. "Lord, we believe!" they cry, and they worship him.

Sometimes, we can know too much for our own good. We can turn faith into a "prove-it" game. We can be stubborn, can play hard to get with God. We Episcopalians can be awfully guilty of trying to fit our faith into a box. We can see a miracle unfold on the ground before our feet, and we are so busy looking for proof that we neglect to fall to our knees and give thanks.

It's not as if we don't have the equipment to see God in front of us. Jesus is forever saying, "Let those with ears, hear." You have been given the means to hear the truth, now use it. Let those with eyes to see, pay attention. You've been given the eyes and the sight to see and interpret what is God and what is not, so watch, look, pay attention. You can see with your heart alone, that's why God gave it to you—so you might see him and believe.

The late Episcopal priest and psychologist John Sanford asserted that we get awfully disturbed when the facts contradict our belief system. Instead of examining and re-shaping our beliefs, we try to discredit the facts themselves. Sanford wrote that when we are "confronted by uncomfortable truths, the human tendency is deny the facts on which the truth rests."

The truth of this Gospel story is that Jesus *is* God, that God *is* at work among us healing and restoring us, and that we have to be open to a relationship with him in order to see his presence.

The world applauds those who think they know it all. The world rewards those who think they know a lot. But God doesn't expect us to have all the answers. We're not asked to know everything. If we think we do, then what's the point of God? It is only when we recognize all the ways in which we are deaf to the truth that we can confess our need for illumination. Then we can cry out our need for God, who in relationship with us will guide us and our need for Jesus Christ, the light who will show us the way. *Amen.*