

Pentecost B15
September 6, 2015
Central Presbyterian Church, Montclair
“Sonographers”
David Noble

Mark 7.24-37

²⁴From there he 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, ²⁵but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. ²⁶Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷He 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.” ²⁸But she answered him, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” ²⁹Then he said to her, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.” ³⁰So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

³¹Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. ³²They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. ³³He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. ³⁴Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” ³⁵And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. ³⁶Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. ³⁷They were astounded beyond measure, saying, “He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.”

A

She just wanted her daughter to be healed. And she let nothing, including Jesus, stand in the way. She was not an Israelite. She did not worship at a synagogue. She was an outsider in several ways. But she heard Jesus was in town and she must have heard about his healing touch. He was trying to fly under the radar, just wanted to be left alone on vacation for a while. But this woman heard he was there and she came and bowed down at his feet, begging Jesus to heal her little girl. He said it wasn’t his job. It wasn’t his job to heal people outside of Israel. His mission was to the Israelites, God’s children. Whatever was going on with Gentiles like her and her daughter was not his concern. It wouldn’t be right for him to spend his resources on dogs like her.

This mother was tenacious. She knew Jesus could heal. She believed it. She said even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs. In other words, she might not qualify as a child of God according to the boundaries of the day, but she wanted to be at the table, she wanted her and her daughter to be fed by Jesus. Even if all they got was leftovers, that would be more than enough. And Jesus heard her faith, her tenacious, humble faith, he stepped over the boundary between them, and her daughter was healed.

We hear cries from parents and children, refugees from Syria and Africa who are descending on Europe by the hundreds of thousands, desperate for acceptance, begging for safety, seeking a new beginning. Some nations listen and say it isn’t their job to rescue refugees and immigrants...yet, other nations open their arms in welcome. Here, presidential candidates debate borders and walls and fears and citizenship, as they declare their Christian faith and reverence for the Bible. Some say it isn’t our job to rescue refugees and immigrants...some say it is. What voices will ultimately be heard and how will our country respond?

B

Jesus' first response to the gentile woman, his calling her a dog, is very controversial, even though he ultimately relents. Some interpretations try to minimize the insult, noting that he used a word more like our word "puppy." But that doesn't do much to humanize the woman. Another interpretation says Jesus was just acting, just trying to teach his disciples a lesson. He treated the woman as most gentiles and women were treated by God's people- belittling and insulting her, in order to demonstrate to the disciples what it looked like and sounded like when God's people rejected outsiders. He didn't mean it, he was teaching a lesson. When she insisted she was worthy of God's love and care despite being a gentile, Jesus ended the lesson by healing her daughter and welcoming her into God's family.

And on the other side of the fence there is an interpretation that says it happened just like it's written--- Jesus rejecting the woman, sneering at her request, and then changing his mind as she pressed her point. This interpretation lifts up Jesus' humanity, allows him to have real human feelings, even as it lifts up the woman who insists on being heard. Jesus listens, he learns, he grows, he changes, and his ministry expands to all people, beyond all boundaries.

C

I think we would diminish the gospel if we felt we had to choose between these interpretations. They are quite different from each other. They may not be reconcilable. But I think we diminish the gospel sometimes when we insist on it being so clear that we don't have to struggle or reflect on what we read.

This encounter between Jesus and the gentile woman should make us think about insiders and outsiders. We should wonder why there are always insiders and outsiders in our communities, our schools, our nation, our individual lives. Why does contempt come from our lips? When will things change? Will they ever change? What difference does it make to be a Christian?

Whatever really happened between Jesus and the woman, it was resolved and the boundary between them was erased. There might be a lots of different interpretations but they all rest on one fact—the woman spoke, and Jesus listened. He really listened. This encounter and the one following it with Jesus and the deaf man both emphasize being able to hear the gospel, the good news that God is at work among us, all of us.

These Bible stories prompt me to wonder about my own hearing. Do I hear the cries of desperation around me- on the streets, or in the stores I visit, or within my family, or inside my own church, or from people who might as well be invisible, whom I never notice? Do my ears need some healing? Am I willing to be changed by what I hear? Do I have the courage to go contrary to what is popular and safe?

D

Just a couple years ago my wife joined a running club in NYC that is unique. It is a club started by a woman named Anne. Anne grew up in North Dakota in a troubled family. Her father was addicted to gambling and that led from one crisis to another within the household. As a teenager there was little Anne could do about her father's problem, but Anne took up running and found that when she ran every day she began to discover answers to some of her own life questions. Somehow running had that effect on her.

She went to college and accepted a good job in Philadelphia. She threw herself completely into her work, maybe in compensation for the difficult days she had endured earlier in life. Climbing the career

ladder was hard work and running was her way of dealing with the stress and it helped her in organizing her thoughts.

Anne's long early morning runs in Philadelphia took her past a group of men who were hanging out in front of a building every morning. Eventually Anne began to say good morning to these people as she ran by, and after a time she realized these were homeless men and the building was a homeless shelter. The men began to look forward to her appearance every morning.

This went on for some time—Anne, using daily running as at time to ponder her personal challenges at work, and the homeless men looking forward to greeting this crazy woman who ran by them every morning at the crack of dawn.

Until Anne suddenly heard an opportunity.

If running was good for her, if it had taught her how to deal with her problems one step at a time, if it could raise her self-esteem and boost her self-confidence, could it also benefit these homeless friends she was passing by every day?

So she stopped running past them and started inviting them to join her. Within two weeks she had nine men between the ages of 28 and 57 running with her at 5 a.m. three days a week. That was in 2007. Before long Anne was CEO of something called "Back On My Feet," which has expanded to eleven major cities across the country, where volunteer runners organize running groups at homeless shelters that allow men and women who have had little to hope and dream about begin to put their lives together one step at a time.

Across our country thousands of homeless men and women now run three mornings a week at 5:45. 90% attendance is required. And there are enough volunteers so no one runs alone, no matter how fast or slow they are. As they successfully begin to make changes in their lives, the Back on My Feet organization offers them job counseling and funding for their first apartments. Hopelessness turns to hope and the lives of those without homes as well as those with homes are being changed.

All because Anne heard something with her ears and her mind and her heart. She heard something that changed the course of her life and her community.

E

I believe people are speaking all around us, sometimes we hear them and sometimes we don't. One of our challenges as Christians, I believe, is to tune our ears – to listen to what is being said by others, and to hear what God is saying about that in our hearts.

The big fancy Christian dictionary word for this is discernment. We discern when we pay attention, when we hear the voices of others and of God, when we hear cries for help and shouts of hope, and when we take action to change ourselves, our community, our world.

In order to discern we need to stop talking. Yes, we are New Jersians. We love to talk. We love to give opinions. There's a popular recipe for good listening- a recipe of 9 to 1- nine parts listening for every 1 part talking.

That's hard. Talking more is sort of a defense against hearing things that might call us to change, to do something different. But God is speaking. Our community is talking.

What do we hear?