

TEXT: Mark 7:24-37

TOPIC: A Syrophenician woman pleads with Jesus for table scraps, so her daughter may be healed.

SUBJECT: When it comes to healing work, there are certain tensions that must be faced.

TITLE: Certain Tensions

Have you seen her? She might be the woman who sits in the back of the church, so she can easily slip out before worship is over. She might not want a seat at the table, but she would be more than happy to have a few crumbs to treat an illness that is killing her child.

Do you recognize him? He might be sitting in plain sight. Life has not been easy for him because he was conditioned when he was little to not ask for what he needed, so he looked for ways to fulfill his needs in other ways that made him blind and deaf to the world.

Do you recognize him? Have you seen her? Do you know their stories?

Our gospel reading today presents us with certain tensions that must be faced. For some of us, they aren't easy tensions to face. In fact, they are certain tensions Mark suggests Jesus and the disciples had to face. They represent a certain tension the Apostle Paul wrote about in Romans 1:16.

These certain tensions require a change of mind and a change of heart about how we are and how we do and don't do things. These certain tensions require a change of heart and mind that requires trusting the good news, as Jesus said in Mark 1:15.

Why? Because Jews and gentiles deserve to be treated exactly the same way, whether you're feeding 5,000 Judeans, with 12 bushel baskets left over or 4,000 gentiles with 7 bushel baskets left over. Jesus refers to the Jews as "God's children" and the gentiles as dogs who get remnants,. Jesus point: It isn't right to take the bread that belongs to God's children and throw it to the dogs. I believe Jesus' criticism speaks to the way others end up being othered. I know Jesus criticism says there's room at the table for everyone.

A couple years ago, I was blessed to get to help with taking care of my granddaughter. She was just starting to form complete sentences – I’ll never forget “I did it!” – and when she would eat, she’d eat in a beautiful, antique, wooden highchair. That doesn’t mean the food would stay on the tray. Some of it would fall on the floor.

On one occasion, she was eating grapes and one of the grapes fell to the floor and one of our dogs quickly gobbled it up. We had to use hydrogen peroxide to make the dog throw it up because grapes are toxic to dogs. But the point the Syrophenician woman makes to Jesus is served by this story. Even the dogs will eat the children’s crumbs.”

Who are the Syrophenician women of our day? They’re women whose children suffer from demons. Maybe their child has developed addictions. Maybe their child is in an abusive relationship. Maybe the demon plaguing their child is a mental illness. Maybe the demon they’re begging to have healed is because their possessed child is parented by someone who lacks the self-awareness to see they’re part of the problem.

As I said earlier, there are certain tensions in today’s reading.

Still, there are other certain tensions this story illustrates. When Jesus leaves Tyre and heads to the Ten Cities through Sidon to the Galilee sea, I think certain tensions suggest that sometimes the path to change isn’t clear. OK. So, the path is a little confusing. It would be like going to Denver to Colorado Springs by way of Boulder, and maybe that’s the point. Maybe that suggests the certain tension the gospel is inviting us to wrestle with.

When Jesus gets to a certain point, some people bring him a man who was deaf and could hardly speak, begging Jesus to heal him. With some unconventional medical practice – putting his fingers in the man’s ears, spitting on his fingers and placing them on the man’s

tongue – Jesus looks to heaven and sighs deeply before saying, “Ephphatha,” which means open up.

Open up. *Did you notice those two simple words?*

Open up. *Say them with me.*

Open up! *Say it loud!*

Open up! *Say it like you mean it!*

Open up!

The healing of the deaf man who could almost speak represents how Jesus met a certain tension, and how the church should meet those certain tensions.

Certain tensions are met when people open up to the possibility of what they can do. Certain tensions are addressed when people see others who have been othered and get to know them by name. Certain tensions are addressed when people open up their hearts and minds by the power of the Holy Spirit.

As United Methodists most of us may remember the “Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors” promotional campaign from a few years back. Clearly the denomination had to work through certain tensions to open up to where it is today and the hopeful future that awaits. Jesus’ deep sigh before he said “open up” to the deaf man who could hardly speak happens because anytime people wrestle with certain tensions, it means standing in solidarity with those who are suffering. Any time people wrestle with certain tensions, it is a call to the church to take a hard look at what it’s doing and whether it is reaching those who suffer in our world. After all, the number 7 – for the baskets leftover by the feeding of the 4,000 in chapter 8

represents completion, perfection, and universality. It calls us not to the community we have been or are, but the community we can be.

Said differently: Certain tensions are a call to open up.

Open up to ministries that heal you and others.

Open up to the people who otherwise go unseen and unknown, after all neither of these people in this passage are given names, are they?

Open up to a new understanding of those with painful experiences, and get to know their stories.

Open up to a broadening of your heart and mind to include whoever in our town has been “othered” – the poor, the addicted, the mentally ill, the abused, the forgotten – because anyone who has been othered is not less than us. They, too, are loved by God and sometimes just need someone to remind them we are all neighbors to be loved.

Open up because community becomes new when it includes everyone; just as it wasn’t limited to Jews in the first century, it isn’t limited to you and I. Living into the new community Jesus lived into requires letting certain tensions challenge you so people you’ve cast as people you’re afraid of – like the Israelites did with Canaanites, and Greeks, and the Romans – might just be what your faith needs.

Opening up means moving beyond talking about it to living with certain tensions and moving toward certain tensions to discover a whole different way of walking with Christ.

That’s always been my experience, at least. It can be yours, as well.

In the name of the triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – one God in perfect community. Amen.