

September 5, 2021  
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Mark 7:24-30 Rising up for healing  
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

When I served as a pastor in the Methodist Church in England, the churches that I served had healing services every few months. I had not experienced healing services in my church when I was growing up. I thought healing was only something that I would see on the television as televangelists would hit someone on the head and the person would fall back because they had been healed. It is important for us to know and to claim that our Bible strongly affirms healing, in fact the root of the word healing in New Testament Greek, *sozo*, is the same as that of salvation and wholeness. Spiritual healing is God's work of offering us wholeness of body, mind, and spirit.

It is important for me to say that a healing service does not detract from the gifts God gives through medicine and psychotherapy. Worship today is no substitute for either medicine or the proper care of our physical and mental health. My hope is that our worship today will add to our total resources for wholeness.

Healing is not magic, but underlying it is the great mystery of God's love and when we pray for healing we are channeling God's love. The nature of our world and our humanity means that suffering will happen. We will get cancer, we will have disease, we will have depression, we will get hurt by the church, and we will get hurt by other people. God does not promise that we shall be spared suffering but God *does* promise to be with us in our suffering.

We bring to God our own frailty and brokenness - felt not just in physical illness, but in guilt, anxiety and all the burdens which weigh us down. We also bring our concerns for others and for the world. Above all, we come to the God who knows our needs before we ask, and whose love revealed in Jesus Christ is stronger than suffering and death.

Today, you will come up to receive your bread and juice in prepared containers. Then, Chris Deeds and I will be here if you would like to be anointed with oil. Anointing the forehead with oil points to the presence of the Holy Spirit and the healing Christ. You will hear these words as we make the sign of the cross on your forehead, "May the power of God's presence heal you in body, mind, and spirit, that you may serve God with a loving heart. Amen."

When I was a pastor in England there was an older woman who had polio as a child and had used forearm crutches her entire life. Watching her walk looked so painful. But she walked up the aisle and knelt down at the altar rail for Communion wincing as she did. She would kneel in prayer for a long time and then with pain on her face she would stand up. I asked her once what she prayed for and she said, "For the strength for one more day." She was in so much pain, but she *knew* that God was with her.

Normally at healing services, you hear a story of Jesus healing someone, and I could not get a particular story out of my head. It comes from Mark's Gospel, "Jesus left that place and went into the region of Tyre. He didn't want anyone to know that he had entered a house, but he couldn't hide. In fact, a woman whose young daughter was possessed by an unclean spirit heard about him right away. She came and fell at his feet. The woman was Greek, Syrophenician by birth. She begged Jesus to throw the demon out of her daughter. He responded, "The children have to be fed first. It isn't right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs." But she answered, "Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." "Good answer!" he said. "Go on home. The demon has already left your daughter." When she returned to her house, she found the child lying on the bed and the demon gone." (Mark 7:24-30 Common English Bible)

This woman is an outsider because of her nationality and her religious beliefs. She is a Phoenician from Syria. Jesus meets this woman, a Syrian mom who is interceding on behalf of her child. She walks across boundaries of gender, religion, and ethnic origins because of her love for her child. She is desperately afraid for her daughter's life. Jesus has had people intercede before. Jairus asked Jesus to heal his sick daughter, but Jairus was a Jewish male of high status who could speak openly to Jesus in public. This woman is a foreigner standing outside of the recognized religious community demanding Jesus' saving power and Jesus says no. Jesus tells her that his mission is for the Jews and the Jews alone. Jesus calls this woman a dog, not fit to be fed the children's bread.

Some commentaries suggest that the word dog is not as harsh as it sounds, that Jesus is referring to her merely as a pet. One commentator even suggested that Jesus winked after he said it, like it was a joke.<sup>1</sup> Nope. The word is dog and dog is what Jesus means. Another commentator said that Jesus' words were a familiar proverb, equivalent to our "charity begins at home." I don't see it. Jesus was convinced that he must not be distracted from his primary mission to his own people. In the Gospel of Matthew, when this story is told, Jesus said, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 15:24). But, this woman doesn't slink away, she boldly responds, "Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

Jesus is in Gentile territory, talking to a Gentile woman. She isn't asking for special treatment. She is telling Jesus, you have plenty. She says that all of the feeding Jesus is doing creates leftovers. She helps Jesus see he can feed both parties at once. She helps him to see how far the kingdom of God will go. Jesus' mission is not restricted to the Jews. Her words set him on a new path. Her words reset his mission.

God's love is so huge, so big, so unexpectedly gracious and wildly inclusive that it even takes Jesus a little while to really grasp it. God's love expands beyond all barriers. In essence, the woman says to Jesus, "We are human too." Jesus tells her, "Good answer! Go on home. The demon has already left your daughter." Then the Syrophenician woman has to trust Jesus, walk out, and go home. She has to decide if she will believe Jesus.

This woman is bold and she inspires me to be bold in sharing what is on my heart not only with God but with people. I don't need to have a stiff upper lip, I can say that I am really struggling. I can say that I miss having a full sanctuary as we worship God together. My favorite writer, Kate Bowler, says, "Life is so beautiful. Life is so hard." Suffering should never be done alone. We can stand with each other to say, "I'm so sorry that this is happening to you. This is awful." When everything comes apart in an instant, we need community. We need to receive.

The Syrian mom pleads on her daughter's behalf and her faith brings about her daughter's healing. She has faith in Jesus' healing power, more faith than that of his own people, more faith than members of his hometown. Her faith calls forth a larger vision of God's mission to the Gentiles. She helps Jesus to radically reorient his vision and vocation.

We are really good as human beings about creating rules that give status and value to some while denigrating others. In the first century, if you were poor, infirm, orphaned, mentally ill, an alien, or a woman, you had a very low status. Two thousand years later, many of these people still live at the margins of society. If someone ends up homeless or on drugs, we think that they are weak or at fault. We shun dirty, smelly people instead of embracing them. The Syrophenician woman called Jesus to a mission of infinite compassion and mercy. There are no barriers between God and any human being: not race, class, ethnicity, gender, age, or physical condition. There should be no such barriers between us as human beings. Status is a product of

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<sup>1</sup> <https://jameshowellsweeklypreachingnotions.blogspot.com/2018/01/what-can-we-say-come-september-9-16th.html>

our own imaginations, invisible to God. All people are equally valuable. Christ's charge to us is for us to see people as they really are, that is, unique individuals, each created in the image of God, and each worthy of our attention, care, love, and respect.

It is our work to make this place one where all people are welcome as siblings in God's family. When we think about how we treat other people in our midst, may we think about if they receive the leftovers after our needs have been provided for? Or do they receive our best?

Today as we think about healing, may we acknowledge that we are all hurting in different ways. Some of us have illness or injury, some of us have damaged or broken relationships, some of us have traumatic memories, or guilt or estrangement from God. Today is an opportunity for us to share the pain. As we share that pain, we are expressing compassion, hope, grace, and our faith in God. We come seeking salvation and wholeness. May the power of God's presence heal us in body, mind, and spirit, that we may serve God with a loving heart. Amen.