

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Gospel, Year B

HE CAME NOT TO ASTONISH BUT TO FEED

Mark 7:24-37

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Analysis by Marcus Felde

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.”

DIAGNOSIS: He Blew Their Minds

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Astounded Beyond Measure

You are only halfway to understanding Jesus when your mind is blown. (The Greek word behind the phrase “astounded beyond measure” is unique—occurs only here in the NT—and means something like “hyper-dumbfounded.”) To watch Jesus do the things he did, even making the deaf to hear and the mute to speak, was to have all one’s old assumptions destroyed. That can be scary. You might not appreciate that. I have that feeling sometimes, watching a magician perform on “America’s Got Talent.” I know that what I just witnessed is not possible—which makes me feel like a fool, because I know the performer has in fact fooled me. So, Jesus is doing something very dangerous by impressing these people so much. He is radically challenging their settled reasoning about the world, themselves, even God.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): What Were They Thinking?

Well, for one thing, they were not expecting a deaf man to hear again. They were accepting the implied judgments of God that they inferred from seeing what sort of lives people received from God. If you are suffering, you must be a sinner; you must have deserved your muteness and deafness. Lameness. Blindness. Depression. Poverty. Your being born in another country (Syria? Phoenicia?), a land that did not know the Lord. What they were thinking, before their minds were blown, was that what they saw was what they got. They thought that salvation, meaningful salvation, was too much to hope for.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Shutting Down

They were on a slow spiral from debilitation and defeat to

death, accepting the inevitable. They were accustomed to good news, if they ever did get any, being contingent on their being better people. This had been the prophetic message of the Pharisees for the last century: obey the law; God will redeem you. The prognosis was not hopeful for people who were beyond the pale, or who suffered from impediments.

PROGNOSIS: He Opened Their Minds and Hearts

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): "Ephphatha"

"Be opened," Jesus said—and it worked like C4 plastic explosive on walls that kept people out of the city of peace, out of the kingdom of God. The man heard. The man spoke. He qualified. The woman believed. She qualified. The door was thrown open.

This is the opposite of the mental entropy and dissolution implied by having one's mind "blown." This is the coming together of reason and righteousness and peacefulness. Righteousness and peace kiss each other (Psalm 85:10), the world is mapped afresh when Jesus says, "Open, sesame."

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Taking It in

The woman who picked up the crumbs of Jesus, the man who was deaf and mute, these received with gladness and faith the gifts God gave so graciously. They became greater than John the Baptist, even if they were least in the kingdom. Because they took in the crumbs, the bread of life. The receptor in them that received Jesus in an effective and constructive way, not merely as a fascinator, was not merely recognition that he was an outlier who did everything well. The receptor was their faith. Jesus had said, "Ask and you shall receive," and the woman did no more (or less) than that.

Faith in Jesus does not mean being impressed, over-awed, or hyper-dumbstruck by Jesus. It does not mean one's mind is blown. It means to breathe in what Jesus is breathing out: life,

composure, wholeness, forgiveness, peace. Oxygen.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Joy and Peace through Believing

One must imagine, because we are not told, that a few people walked away that day with new life. You and I should walk away from the story with that. After all, we have heard the whole story, and we know that Jesus was in fact thrown to the dogs, and we are the dogs, and we have tasted the bread of life and know that in him is gladness, beyond all sadness, etc. Like the Gerasene demoniac when the people came out to see what he looked like AFTER: "clothed, and in his right mind."