

The Syrophenician Woman's Faith

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

Jesus Cures a Deaf Man

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

I'm not sure the last time I was astounded beyond measure. Perhaps at the birth of my child, 3 years ago.

What about you? When was the last time you were astounded beyond measure? Utterly astonished? Completely amazed, overwhelmed by astonishment.

When was the last time something was so amazing, so miraculous, that to try and fathom it simply stopped you in your tracks—you were stricken, taken aback, overcome?

Actually, I can think of other times, since then, but only negative ones. Times when I was astonished by the ill will of another, taken aback by hate on display, overwhelmed, astonished.

And, if we're honest, there is a bit of that kind of astonishment in today's passage as well, at least for this reader, and I imagine for the Syrophenician woman.

But that isn't where we're left. Today, the astonishment we're left with is the kind of utter astonishment that comes from witnessing Jesus' miracles.

The people were utterly astonished, and said "he has done all things well." They're astonished by his goodness and power, on full display in making even the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.

That wonder, that awe and amazement are the closing words of today's passage, and so I thought it might be good to assume a position of astonishment, and wonder, going into today's passage as well.

Let us pray: God, astound us. Overcome us with wonder. May this text, and your story, stop us in our tracks, leaving nothing on our hearts and minds but your overwhelming goodness and power. In the name of your son, the miracle worker, we pray, Amen.

Today's text includes two miracle stories, paired side by side.

Jesus goes to the region of Tyre, seemingly looking for a break. What isn't immediately obvious is how strange this is. If you are Jesus, and you are looking to retreat, to get away, to go somewhere where you might escape notice, Tyre is certainly that place. But in all the wrong ways.

Just 130 years before Jesus' birth, the community of Tyre had helped King Antiochus to siege Jerusalem and desecrate the Jewish temple. A Jew hearing this story would have been shocked to imagine that Jesus, of all people, would be naive enough to go to Tyre. As one preacher put it, "if Jesus were American, it would be as though, after a long and hard season of ministry, he woke up one morning and decided he needed to get away and clear his head. And so he jumped on a plane and landed at the Kabul airport. Or in Tehran. Or in Sinaloa (*see-nuh-low-*

uh). Or any other number of places populated by people around whom we have reasons to be guarded. To go there seems reckless. He would have been alone, alright. Alone, and exposed.”

So this is **our first moment of wonder, our first chance to practice astonishment**: why Tyre, Jesus? What are doing, retreating to Tyre? What motivates this choice, what did you think you would find there?

And yet, even in Tyre, he couldn't escape notice. A woman whose daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, came to him and bowed down at his feet. She was a Gentile, a Syrophenician woman. She begged him to heal her daughter.

And here's our **second moment of wonder, our second chance to practice astonishment**. Only this time, we are astounded by the harshness of Jesus' response: let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.

These words ought to make us wince. That's the kind of racial slur we teach our children to speak out against. He calls this grieving Gentile woman a dog.

This moment in scripture is so uncomfortable, as it must have been for the Syrophenician woman herself, that many have spent lots of energy trying to explain it away. The arguments go something like this: “maybe Jesus is bone tired, and wants, just for once, to take care of himself before taking care of anyone else. Maybe he's fed up with people begging him for favors. Maybe he's simply describing the reality of his mission: the healing he offers is for the children of Israel first. Maybe his ethnic slur is just a test, a deliberate provocation to prove the woman's devotion”

All of these are possible, but none of them do justice to the power of the story, none of them sit in wonder, disbelief, astonishment, quite long enough. In the words of the Rev. Debie Thomas,

“Jesus is fully human – a product of his place and time, shaped as well as we are by the conscious and unconscious biases, prejudices and entitlements of his culture. Moreover, he is God incarnate, a holy Son still working out the scope and meaning of the divine vocation his Father gave him. He knows he's meant to share the Good News. But even he needs to “be opened” to how radically good that good news is.”

And so the good news is put into the mouth of the Syrophenician woman, and with her words come a third moment of wonder, a third chance to practice astonishment. She turns his slur right back at him, replying “sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.”

She calls out and proclaims just how radical Jesus' ministry is. Again in the words of Rev. Debie Thomas, “she cuts to the very heart of Jesus' boundary-breaking, taboo-busting, division destroying ministry of table fellowship. After all, he's the Messiah who eats with tax collectors and prostitutes. He's the rabbi who breaks bread with sinners. His disciples are the ones who

earn the Pharisees' contempt for eating with unwashed hands. The table is where Jesus shows the world who God is.

And so the table is precisely where the outsider, the Gentile, the outcast, the "Other," calls him out. As if to say, "Lord, where's my Good News? Where's my place at the table? When will the goodness be good enough for me and for my daughter? If you are who you say you are, how can you be content while anyone goes hungry in the vicinity of your table? The good news is here somewhere, latent and waiting. I know it's here; you already have it. Now let it come to fruition. Look harder. Push further. See better. Believe that there's enough good news to go around. Expand the circle. Dissolve the boundaries. Widen the table. Preach your Good News to me."

Isn't that amazing, the good news of a Gentile woman rebuking Jesus, reminding him of the great Good News he's coming to proclaim, the welcome he's meant to extend, to and for all.

And here, **for a fourth time, I am astounded** because Jesus changes. He allows himself to be humbled, rearranged, and remade. We know how hard that is.

We know what it feels like to be called out for our missteps, for the times when we limit God's good news, to be blasted for our biases. And how often do we respond to moments like that with genuine change. Not often. More often, we double down. But not Jesus, he lets himself be humbled, and he opens his heart to the possibility of being wrong. He responds with grace, for her, and for himself, and from his grace extends healing not only for her daughter, but for the Syrophenician woman herself. It heals our hearts, when someone who has done us wrong corrects their actions.

Are you astounded yet? Has the awe captured your hearts and imaginations?

A second miracle follows. Back towards Galilee, they bring him a deaf man who also could not speak well. And they begged him, just as the woman had, to lay his hand on him.

Jesus takes him to the side, private and away from the crowd.

Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "be opened."

Jesus sighed. The divine sigh – **that is our fifth moment of astonishment.**

Wonder on that for a minute, Jesus sighs. Is it a heavy sigh? An ironic sigh? Is Jesus sharing the joke with God? as in, "be opened – Okay, father, I get it. Listen, learn, be opened. I hear you, I'm working on it."

His ears were opened, his tongue released, and he spoke plainly.

This **miracle of healing is our sixth moment of astonishment**. Jesus ordered them to tell no one, but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. The second time in two stories that those interacting with Jesus defy him.

They can't help but proclaim it, for they were astounded beyond measure.

So the question remains, are we?

Are we, the hearers of the Word, astounded beyond measure? Are we, in the here and now, a seventh moment of astonishment in today's Scripture?

Astonishment is powerful. When we feel overwhelmed in all the wrong ways, when the truth of our lives and the world feels too bleak, we can choose to reorient. Astonishment, awe, wonder, and the gratitude that follows – it is an antidote to disillusionment, bitterness, and closed-mindedness. Astonishment has the power to un-stuck, to reorient us, to enliven us and embolden us.

Are we astounded by the immeasurable love of God, that invites all to the table, even those we speak harsh and harmful words to? For that matter, are we astounded by the immeasurable love of God that invites us, even us – the speaker of harsh and harmful words – to the table?

Are we astounded by the story of Jesus, who listened to the challenge of the Other? Who, even though he was the son of God, humbled himself long enough to learn what only a vulnerable outsider can teach?

Are we astounded by the miracles of Jesus? Do his words, "be opened" stop us in our tracks? Do they open us to see and speak the healing power of God? Are we opened to the truth that God isn't done with us yet, that God is still stretching our own capacity to love?

What would it look like face the week ahead with astonishment? What would it mean to go into the week to come following Jesus words, to "be opened." What would it mean to witness to the miracles God is still busy working in our lives and in the world? What would it mean, from our astonishment, to choose humility, love, welcome, and healing? And to proclaim, more zealously than ever before, the astounding goodness and power of Jesus Christ our Lord.

May it be so, Amen.