

Sermon for Sunday, September 8, 2024 Paula Papky for MacNeill Baptist Church

Isaiah 35:4-7 Psalm 146:1-10 James 2:1-10, 14-17 Mark 7:24-37

Draw the Circle Wider

So, what's Jesus been up to in the first six chapters of Mark's Gospel? Quite a lot, actually. He's been baptized and then tested by Satan in the wilderness. He's called his first four disciples: Peter, Andrew, James and John. He's begun teaching and healing in his home region of Galilee. At Capernaum, in the synagogue, he taught and then he healed a man who'd been in the power of an evil spirit, amazing people and making them ask each other who was this with power over evil spirits?

His reputation was spreading. He healed Simon's mother-in-law, restoring her to her family and community. And crowds had begun to gather, bringing people for healing. So many people had long believed that their misfortunes, their illnesses, were caused by evil spirits for which there was no remedy. But people saw that Jesus had power over evil spirits.

It wasn't long until multitudes needing healing came to him and he was overwhelmed. His reputation grew so much that he had to stay away from cities and towns and go to small villages in the country. But still, so many people came.

He went to dine at the house of Levi, a tax collector. This act enraged the Pharisees. They watched him and saw that he and his disciples did not fast. They ate without observing ritual hand-washing. When he healed a man on the Sabbath, it was the last straw. The Pharisees and the Herodians began to conspire against him, how to destroy him. And we're only in chapter three!

After a while, Jesus' own family came and tried to persuade him to give up this dangerous mission he was on. But he refused. He publicly disowned his mother and brothers and pointed to his disciples and other followers as his new family. This was a shocking statement in a time and place when family, and especially family honour, were so revered. Some in the crowds, especially Pharisees and Scribes, said he was out of his mind, himself possessed by an unclean spirit. But the crowds kept growing and he continued teaching by telling parables.

One day when he and his disciples were at sea and they were terrified he spoke to wind and waves and they ceased. He healed a man called Demon, so gripped by evil spirits that he was kept chained up in a graveyard. He healed a woman of a flow of blood. A synagogue leader called Jairus begged him to heal his daughter who then died before Jesus got to the house. And Jesus touched her – actually touched a corpse – and restored her to life.

When he returned to his hometown and carried on teaching and healing, his own people spoke against him. Who does he think he is? We know he's the son of Mary and he's an itinerant carpenter, they said. He tried to move on from Nazareth but the crowds were huge – 5,000 or more. And he fed them all with bread and fish which somehow multiplied. Finally, he was seen by his disciples to walk on water. There was fear, as well as wonder. He needed rest. And so he travelled east into gentile country, to Tyre, on the Mediterranean. Let's let Jesus tell the next story his way.

"I was exhausted but even in Tyre the crowds gave me no rest. There were so many needing healing. Mostly these were people who had terrible lives. Their taxes were so high that they no longer owned their own land.

They were treated like slaves by their absentee land owners and resident overseers. They could not even afford to feed their own families more than one small meal a day. They were hopelessly poor.

And then there were the lepers, the deranged, the sex workers, those missing a limb, the blind, the deaf and the lame. All those were clearly outside the circle of synagogue leaders, rich land owners, and even their own families. These lowly ones believed evil spirits were everywhere, causing illness and misfortune, making people ill and deeming them unclean.

I knew the Pharisees and Herodians were plotting to kill me because I healed people just by touching them, blessing, and forgiving them. I shared food with tax collector's sinners. I didn't follow the purity rules. Many said I could cast out demons. They asked how I had power over the elements, how I could have spoken to wind and waves and made them cease. Ounce I even touched the corpse of a little girl and restored her back to the circle of her family and community. In some eyes I was polluting myself. But many others believed I had that power and they kept bringing me those who needed healing.

I was exhausted. And so I travelled to the seacoast, to the region of Tyre. It was a gentile area. Someone found me a safe house where I would be known. And I settled in. I thought I was safe, left to pray and to rest. But it was not to be.

And now we hear the story from a woman's point of view.

One of the few powers the women of my community had was gossip. And that was the way I found that the Galilean healer was in our district. My predicament was common among women of my day. No longer a wife, I had no one to speak for me or support me. That was bad enough. But I also had a little daughter tormented by an evil spirit. Everyone knew. They considered us both unclean and to be avoided. And so when I heard of this healer, Jesus, I knew I had to speak for myself. I had to beg him for a gift: that he heal my daughter.

I threw myself at his feet, expressing wordlessly my dire need for a patron. And I'll never forget our conversation.

When I asked for him to heal my daughter he answered immediately and quite rudely. He implied I was like a dog, a dirty scavenger, looking for food scraps. He told me his mission of healing was only for the sake of the people of Israel, the children, he called them. It was not to be given to those outside the circle of God's covenant people. Not to be given to dogs like me, a gentile.

I took a chance replying as I did, challenging him. I said, surely even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.

He weakened then. At first he looked shocked that a woman spoke at all to a stranger, in a public place. And that a woman presented a counter argument. But I knew he had heard me. I saw his eyes fill with compassion. It was as if he could sense that the circle of God's people, God's children, was widening; that he was sent by God to people beyond Israel, drawing in all who believed in him.

And then in a softer voice he said, "for saying that you may go – the demon has left your daughter."

He had given me and my daughter the blessing of healing, of life, restoring us to our community. And I can't help feeling that I, a nobody, a woman alone, had taught the teacher, perhaps even changing the course of his life. He would draw the circle of those beloved by God larger and larger. He would gather people who

believe in him into loving communities, each offering blessing and hope and joy to other seekers. He would draw in people who would come to know him as the Son of God. Amen.