

September 10, 2006 Mark 7:24-37

adapted by Douglas Harding

Crisis

On the second day of vacation the call came. Nothing to do with the church or our family, it was the cats. The cat sitter, who told us she had a key to the house, did not have a key, and could not get in to feed them. And no one else had a key either. The crisis caused some anxious moments that morning. Once the problem was solved, we had a wonderful vacation.

Yet our crisis pales in comparison to far greater events. The Gulf Coast continues to rebuild from the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. A year later people are still homeless, jobless, and perhaps hopeless. And this weekend our nation remembers the attack and destruction of five years ago. We were plunged into a crisis, forever immortalized by the phrase 9/11.

Mark introduces us to two persons in crisis, a woman comes to Jesus to have her daughter healed, and a deaf man is brought to Jesus to have his speech and hearing restored.

Jesus always attracted messy people. These are not people in denial. They need help, and they need it right away.

The woman has three strikes against her — she is a woman, she is a Gentile, and she has a demon-possessed daughter. None would win her any first-century Jewish popularity contests. And being physically imperfect, the deaf man would have been marginalized by his socio-religious culture as well. The sick were sick for a reason — perhaps God was punishing them!

The woman has heard about Jesus (v. 25), and the deaf man and his friends must have as well — he was a healer and a need-meeter. They have evident needs, they are willing to admit it, and these needs are the very thing that makes them attracted to Jesus.

In humble spirit, this Gentile woman comes and bows at Jesus' feet, begging him to cast the demon out of her daughter (vv. 25-26). Jesus' response is interesting: "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." He makes reference to being the Messiah for the Jews as God's children over and above the "dogs," as the Gentiles were scornfully called.

Perhaps he is testing her faith. Perhaps he is setting up a chance to level the playing field between the Jews and Gentiles, similar to the way he eliminated clean and unclean food items earlier in chapter 7.

Either way, the woman, instead of being defensive is contrite. She might be a cultural dog, but she will gladly accept that position if it means being fed what she seeks.

This Gentile mother both bows down and cries out on behalf of her daughter. Her approach to Jesus is humble and broken.

And she responds in faith. The bravado of her response to Jesus proves that she knows who she addresses. Jesus heals, and nothing will stop her from being faithful to that knowledge. Matthew tells us Jesus responds to her by saying, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish."

In healing the deaf man, Jesus puts his fingers into his ears as a symbol of opening them. He spits and then touches the man's tongue as a symbol of loosening it. After healing him, the Master bids him and his friends to remain quiet.

But the healed tongue won't stop running! Ironically, their disobedience to Jesus' request shows how much faith they have in him. They were "astounded beyond measure" and proclaimed what he had done zealously (vv. 36-37).

Today our culture values faith in self. Faith in science. Faith in technological advances. Faith in money and its security. It never promotes faith like a child.

For both the woman and the man, their need was evident. Their spirit was humbled. And their response was faith. While the circumstances of their stories differ from ours, Jesus operates the same today as then. He still opens the souls of messy people when their needs drive them to humility and faith in him.

Our needs are varied. An outsider to Jesus needs reconciliation. A person with daunting, hidden sin needs freedom. One suffering from pain in the past needs healing. A struggling marriage needs honesty. An uncertain future needs hope.

In time of crisis, when the need becomes evident, the spirit is humbled, and the response is faith, that is when Jesus touches the human soul.

"We could have paid contractors to fix our house, but we needed the volunteers to fix our hearts."

— A family at Pass Christian UMC in Mississippi giving thanks for volunteer relief workers

"The hurricane offered us as a church an incredible opportunity to reach people we would never have reached before. . . . Walls and carpet really don't matter. It's about people."

— Chris Cumbest, coordinator of church recovery for the Mississippi Conference