

JESUS ANSWERS THE PRAYERS OF A PAGAN WOMAN AND HEALS A MAN WHO COULD NEITHER HEAR NOR SPEAK

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on September 7, 2003
Scripture: Mark 7:24-37

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Jesus wanted to get away. He needed a break. He was tired, drained, worn out. So he went outside Jewish territory into the region of Tyre – a predominantly pagan region. “He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice.” Jesus wanted time for himself. He needed to rest. He put a sign on the outside of his hotel room, “Do not disturb.” He didn’t “want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice.” He wasn’t at all successful in his attempt to conceal his presence.

What was it about Jesus that he couldn’t escape notice even when he didn’t want people to know where he was? My guess is that Jesus couldn’t separate his *vacation self* from his *work self*. Some of us go on vacation and become completely different persons. At home we’re quite conservative in our lifestyle. We wear a suit, we shine our shoes, and we look professional. But when we go on vacation out come the sunglasses, the gold chains around our neck, the muscle shirt, balloon pants and sandals. We’re two different people – one person at home and another on vacation. But Jesus wasn’t like that. He was the same person on vacation as he was at home. So although he needed rest and relaxation his heart of compassion was quickly recognized. “He could not escape notice.”

In nearly everything Jesus does, he’s more successful than we are. But there’s one area where we, the church, are more successful. We’re far more successful in concealing the presence of the Risen Christ. We conceal his presence from parents who, like the Syrophenician woman, have children beyond their control. The Syrophenician woman was a mother. Maybe she was a single parent. Maybe her husband wasn’t around very much or didn’t

give her much help with her daughter. The woman's daughter "had an unclean spirit" and she came and bowed down at his feet." Whatever that means, it surely means that she was unable to control her daughter or keep her from self-destructive behavior. Whatever it means to have "an unclean spirit" it surely means that the daughter – probably a teenager – lacked all self-control. She was possessed. How did her daughter get that way? Had she gotten involved in drugs or the occult? Had she been physically or sexually abused? Had she run away from home? Did she simply not do her homework and take any interest in school? We don't know. All we know is that her pagan mother who didn't worship the God of Jesus deeply loved her daughter, came to Jesus and "begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter."

The Syrophoenician woman was not only a mother, she was a Gentile. That means she wasn't a church member. She didn't know much about the Bible or the God of the Bible – like increasing numbers of people in our town. She was unchurched, nevertheless she was attracted to Jesus. Most nonchurched people don't care if you're a Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, or Baptist – but if we can demonstrate we can heal, guide and nurture their children they will seek us out. Wouldn't be wonderful if the Oxford Presbyterian Church had such a reputation for healing people – especially young people - that the Risen Christ could not escape notice among us?

We have probably the best facility in Oxford for ministering to those outside the church. When our congregation was contemplating how to rebuild we briefly considered building a much smaller church. But after a lot of thought and prayer we decided to build big – to build a church that would serve the whole community. Our hope is that girl scouts and boy scouts and early intervention and all the other community programs we have will recognize the powerful healing presence of the Risen Christ and that he will not escape their notice. We have the potential to be

a powerhouse for young and old. If all the baptized members of our church up to the age of 18 came to Church School or Logos our church would not be able to contain them all. The only thing we have to do is allow the presence of the Risen Christ to be made known. Stop hiding his presence. The Risen Christ loves these young people as well as old – whether or not they’re church-ed – whether or not they believe in our God.

One more thing. The Syrophenician woman shows us the lengths parents will go to find help for their children. I must confess I don’t understand why Jesus hassled the mother. What he said to the woman sounds down right rude. “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” How would you like a religious leader to call you or your children a “dog”? I’ve read all kinds of exclamations for the words of Jesus. He was testing the humility of the woman. He was, himself, experiencing a conversion experience whereby he discovered the love of his Father for the whole world. He was engaging in playful repartee with the woman who recognized what he was doing and rose to the occasion. I don’t know how to explain what Jesus said, but I’m impressed with how the woman persevered and didn’t give up or allow herself to be put off.

She reminds us that parents will go to any length to save their children from disaster. I heard a Civil War story last week illustrating how far a parents love will go. “A Quaker family lived in Pennsylvania. Against the father's wishes, the son Jonathan ran off and enlisted in the cause of the North during the Civil War. Time passed and no word came from Jonathan. One night the father had a dream that his son had been wounded in action, was in distress and needed the care of his father. The father left the farm, and discovered where the troops might be. He made his way by horse-drawn buggy until he came to the scene of action. He inquired until he found the commander and asked about his son. The commander replied that there had been

heavy action earlier in the day and many had fallen wounded. Some had been cared for; others were still out in the trenches. The commander gave permission to go and try and find his son. He told him where the action had taken place. It was now getting dark and the father lighted a lantern. While searching for his son, he came across many wounded young men. Some were calling for help, and others were too seriously wounded to cry for assistance. The task seemed impossible. How could he find his son among all those wounded and dying? He devised a little plan. Methodically, he would comb the scene of action with his lantern. But that wasn't fruitful, as he stumbled over body after body. He began calling loudly, 'Jonathan Smythe, thy father seeketh after thee!' He would walk a little ways, and call again, 'Jonathan Smythe, thy father seeketh after thee!' A groan and response could be heard here and there, 'I wish that were my father.' He kept diligently at his search. Then he heard a very faint, barely audible reply, 'Father, over here.' And then, 'I know you would come.' The Father knelt down, took him in his arms, comforted him with his presence, dressed the wound, carried him to the buggy and took him to a place of seclusion and nursed him back to health."

I daresay that many a young person wishes that the Syrophoenician mother was their mother – who loved her children so much that she prayed daily and with perserverance until her child was healed.

Ever-living God,
in your mercy you promised to be not only our God,
but also the God of our children.

We thank you for receiving N. and N. by baptism. Keep them always in your love. Guide them as they grow in faith. Protect them in all the dangers and temptations of life. Bring them to confess Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior and be his faithful disciples to their life's end; in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.