

Sermon
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 5, 2021

Mark 4:24-37

I just finished reading a book entitled Women of the Pandemic; Stories from the Front Lines of Covid-19 written by Canadian journalist Lauren McKeon. It was disturbing, horrific, incredibly sad, but also very enlightening, hopeful, compassionate and inspiring. It is about, well, women on the frontline of the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada. It was about who they were, what their roles were, and what difference they have made.

Then along side of this reading came the story in Mark of the Syrophenician woman and Jesus. Alone with Jesus, but with singular vision and determination the woman pleads with him to heal her daughter. His response challenged her and challenges us. But the little girl is miraculously healed. Following this encounter Jesus goes on to another place and is brought a deaf man who could not speak, and he too, is healed. He can hear and speak.

In midst of the unfamiliar places and faces, in the midst of the terror of illness, fear and loneliness we cry out for and even demand Christ's healing for those we know and those we don't know. If we let our ears be unstopped and voices heard we astounded by God's unconditional and compassionate in-breaking and healing presence.

I want to share with you a small part, now and later in the sermon, of the introduction to Women of the Pandemic just because in some way you will know these people in your lives too;

“...you will walk COVID-19 wards alongside emergency room doctors and nurses, hospital cleaners, hospitality workers, Personal Support Workers, and infectious disease researchers. You will feel the curved bow of their slumped shoulders and their grief. You will sit next to a trucker on her return from a long-haul delivery from the US, burning with fever, delirious and unable to cross the border and go home. You’ll attend the funeral of a woman who worked at a meat processing plant with her husband, and who contracted the virus during one of Canada’s worst early outbreaks. You will meet grocery store workers with aching feet and pounding heads, full of worry and exhaustion;...”

But let’s go back to our story from Mark.

Jesus entered the house through the back door looking forward to a time of quiet and restoration. He mentioned to his traveling companions that he didn’t want anyone to know he was there, this was his time. Quite likely he was with a few of his disciples, as it wasn’t safe to travel alone. He was in the region of Tyre, Gentile country northwest of Galilee, away from home and the intensity of the Pharisees, scribes and the crowds at home. On the way he had pondered on the messages he had been trying to convey to them around the purity laws. He had said, “It’s not what goes into the body that defiles rather it is what comes from inside, evil intentions from the heart that defile. “ He shook his head; even the Jewish leaders don’t seem to understand how they preach with loud words the

laws given by God to Moses and then do what suits them. The crowds see that and are confused! He then wondered how he would be received here In a Gentile community.

His quiet and peace was fleeting. Someone saw him enter the village and knew who he was and the house where he was staying; here was that man who healed, right in our town! And then she ran to tell her friend, her friend whose daughter was so ill; the sweet little girl. She had seen her friend become more and more tired from the demands of caring and worrying, meeting the needs of the rest of her family as well as doing her utmost, day and night, for her sick daughter. The endless meals, going to the market, getting water, laundry and animal care, and on and on, it just didn't stop. But she also saw incredible resilience in her friend, the will and fortitude to keep going to be there for her family no matter what. She was strong and smart. She was a good friend and she had to be given every opportunity to find healing for her child. They had heard and talked about this Jewish carpenter and rabbi from Galilee, they'd heard of his healing among the Jewish people. He was really unusual but seemed so caring of just the ordinary people and especially people who mostly didn't matter. What brought him here to our Greek town anyway? Oh well, that doesn't matter now. I just have to get over to her house and tell her HE'S here!

There was a pounding on the door, not just a polite tap either. It was urgent! Jesus stood from the table where he was having a much needed meal by himself. The day of travel had been long. He opened the door and much to his amazement the woman he glanced at was now at his feet in supplication. He felt

a wave of annoyance go through his body. She was a woman from this outlying town – a Greek woman – what would she know about him anyway. But she did, for immediately, without introduction or polite conversation she begged him on her knees to cast out the demon in her young daughter. “Make her well, PLEASE! Her pain is desperate, my family is suffering too, PLEASE make her well.”

Taken aback Jesus remarks, “Let the children, my people, the people of Israel, be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs, you Gentiles.” With eyes wide and looking full into his face, she responded without missing a beat, even after having been referred to as a dog, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”

In a moment of brilliant clarity, a flash remembering of who he was, where he had come from and his mission; that here, at the margins, were also the children of God to whom he was called to love, to heal, to teach and to care for. Jesus said; “For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter.” She ran home, stopping for nothing. Did he really heal her child when children really are seen as having so little value? She ran! At home her little girl lay peacefully on her bed, the demon gone. And then, likely, she sobbed her thanks and relief, hugged her child tightly. And life went on...

And Jesus momentarily watched this bright and strong woman run down the street toward home and daughter, then closed the door, his meal now forgotten. He may have leaned against the door, extraordinarily tired, not just from the journey but from this encounter. From the great shift realization that he was also

called to be here, among those who had just a shred of the story and faith. But it was enough, absolutely enough.

Even Jesus “learned” about the fullness of the kingdom of God. And that, no matter who has been pushed away, shunned, denied, at the margins, their littlest bit of faith in God is enough.

And then Jesus traveled on. As he entered another village in Greek territory he brought a man who was deaf and could not speak. A man who was, too often treated as worthless, left by the side of the road. The crowds begged Jesus to heal him – how different from the previous story where the mother came alone, no crowd accompanying her and she pleads for her daughter by herself. And going into a private place with the man, Jesus put his fingers in his ears and with his own spit touched the mute man’s tongue. Jesus never even saw the little girl let alone touch her. Sighing and saying “Ephphatha!” “Be opened!” Jesus causes the man to hear and speak. Tell no one, Jesus says, but the astounded crowd will have nothing of that and tell everyone they can. “He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.”

Again, from Women of the Pandemic; ...“you will meet mothers who juggled impossible task loads, who were pushed out of their jobs, who gave birth during a swirling pandemic; entrepreneurs who balanced their businesses on the brink, who lost livelihoods, who lost dreams; hospital workers who endured racist, anti-Asian slurs while riding the bus, on their way to keep us all safe. You will understand what it is to don layers of personal protective equipment (PPE) before

dashing to swab Canada's first COVID-19 patient, kickstarting vital research into the mystery virus. You will feel the twinning determination and loneliness of one of the country's top vaccine researchers as she gets closer and closer to a solution in a lab far from home, not having seen her children in months. And you will slip behind closed doors and witness decisions that saved, and frustrated, the country."

The Greek woman from Tyre could have been any one of the women from this book. She is bold, strong, knows what she wants and knows for whom she wants it. She doesn't really know what the outcome will be, there is huge risk. Before the crisis of a sick child she probably didn't see herself as bold or strong, but she did what she had to do no matter how others might have seen her; disruptive, demanding, pushy....it doesn't matter.

"Ephphatha!" "Be Opened!" Jesus, be opened to a Greek woman who believes in your healing gifts. Jesus, "be opened" to your God who claims a wandering and sinful people. Jesus, "be opened" to those on the very margins of every society. "Ephphatha!" "Be opened" people to the power of God that we encounter in our broken and hurting world today. "Be opened" to hearing others' stories, "be opened" to tell your own. Be opened to the hurting and then, also to the healing.

In midst of the unfamiliar places and faces, in the midst of the terror of illness, fear and loneliness we cry out for and even demand Christ's healing. If we let our ears be unstopped we are astounded by God's unconditional and compassionate in-breaking and healing presence. We will hear it in the stories of those both far

from us and those very near. And we will find our own voices to tell our own stories of God's healing.

Amen