

“Strange and Wonderful Stories”

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Mark wants you totally, breathlessly, enthusiastically captivated by wonderful Jesus!

Mark 7:24-37

February 16, 2020

(Corinth sermons are available in audio and print forms at corinthtoday.org/sermons.)

Somewhere else

When I think of the words “strange” and “wonderful,” I generally think of somewhere else, not home. In other words, although much in Hickory is “wonderful” to me, after a quarter of a century none of it is really “strange.” Visitors and newcomers might think our street system is strange. I did when I first saw signs like Tenth Street Lane Court NW, but not anymore. It’s just our town.

Linda and I have been privileged to travel to Switzerland, where you can find chocolate covered jalapenos. Strange, but wonderful. And to Turks and Caicos, where there’s an island of odd-looking iguanas that look like mini-dinosaurs. Strange, but wonderful. And to Hawaii where we swam with spinner dolphins. Did you know dolphins put half their brain to sleep at a time? Strange, but wonderful.

The last time Linda and I were in Israel, we happened on a celebration late one evening while out for a walk. Orthodox Jewish revelers were dancing and shouting, carrying a rabbi holding a large Hebrew scroll high in the air. It was Simchat Torah, “rejoicing in the law,” and marked the beginning of their liturgical year. Such revelry over the Scripture is strange to us – but wonderful.

Strange

If the four Gospels in the New Testament, the first century books that tell the story of Jesus, are like “home” to you, the two stories we read today from Mark 7:24-37 are strange. They’re also wonderful, but let’s start with the “strange.”

I don't mean in any way to devalue these stories, to question their accuracy or relevance. I just want to point out that they do not fit the mold of how we usually think about Jesus or, in most cases, the mold of most other gospel stories.

We begin in verse 24, where we find Jesus in the vicinity of Tyre. That's strange. Tyre is a coastal city in modern Lebanon, to the north and west of Galilee. As the crow flies, it's about as far as from Hickory to Statesville as it is from Capernaum (the center of Jesus' ministry) to Tyre, but culturally and religiously it's like going from Hickory to New Orleans, or maybe even Tokyo.

In ancient times, Tyre was the most important port city on the eastern rim of the Mediterranean. A twin city covering both an island and an inland rocky ridge, Tyre was difficult to conquer. Nebuchadnezzar finally gave up after thirteen years of trying. Alexander the Great's siege succeeded after seven months, but he was so angry at the rebellious city he had 30,000 of his residents killed. From a biblical perspective, Tyre's pagan religion was even more incorrigible. Tyre's most famous daughter in the Bible was Jezebel, the wicked queen, wife of Ahab, whose 400 prophets confronted Elijah.

So isn't it strange that Jesus is in Tyre? It's the furthest he ever retreats in the Gospels from predominantly Jewish areas. Mark told us earlier (3:8) that Jesus' reputation had spread to Tyre. It's one thing for Tyrians to come looking for Jesus in Galilee. It's strange for Jesus to go there.

Mark also says Jesus "entered a house" in Tyre and "did not want anyone to know it." We've run into his propensity to retreat from the crowds before, even in Galilee, but it's something that feels strange throughout Jesus' life – starting with his first crib in a Bethlehem manger. During his three decades of life, Jesus is far more often incognito than in the public eye.

Mark also says Jesus "could not keep his presence a secret." Literally in the Greek: "He was not able to be hidden." That's strange. I thought Jesus could do anything. If he wanted to hide, couldn't he do so?

In verses 25-26 we find a situation that doesn't feel quite as strange in the Gospels – a parent whose child is demon-possessed. Demon possession is not rare in the Gospels, but it does seem strange to us. Most of us don't deal regularly with this phenomenon. We fit somewhere on the spectrum between cynicism and avoidance.

It's worth noting that although there are many examples of exorcism in Jesus' ministry and in the book of Acts, there are no instructions related to it in the letters of Paul or the rest of the New Testament. There are a handful of references to demons (1 Timothy 4:1; James 2:19; 3:15), my favorite being the one where Paul says neither angels nor demons will ever be able to separate us from the love of God (Romans 8:38-39). But I don't get the idea that Christians are supposed to invest much time worrying about demons or doing anything about them. My sense is that demon possession was

more common during the earthly ministry of Jesus and the early church because it was a major Satanic strategy to oppose God's kingdom breaking through.

Having said that, I don't dismiss it when someone says they have encountered demonic activity. I trust what John wrote, "Greater is he who is in you than he that is in the world" (1 John 4:4). Spiritual warfare is real, but we fight it not by being obsessed over it but with the Word of God and prayer (Ephesians 6:11ff.).

What's strange about Jesus' exorcism in Tyre is the boldness of this particular mother. She had several strikes against her when it came to requesting an audience from a visiting rabbi. She was a woman. She parented a child who was not only known to be disabled (that alone would have kept her isolated) but disabled with a demon. She was also Greek, so even in Tyre, a Syrophonecian city, she was a foreigner. Yet with all these strikes against her, she begs and begs and begs for Jesus to free her daughter.

Then comes the strangest of all parts of this story. The Jesus you and I think we know would never say what Jesus said in verse 27: "First let the children eat all they want, for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs." We decry condescension, especially when it is racist, and even more so when it is insulting, and this seems very much to be a condescending, racist insult. From Jesus? That's strange.

I don't feel called to explain every difficult saying of Scripture. I actually think it's good that sometimes Jesus is "strange," if "strange" means not conforming to our expectations. It's possible that this is simply a proverb, along the lines of "Don't cast your pearls before swine." That's also a Jesus saying, but it doesn't imply that Jesus considers some people no more valuable than pigs...or dogs. This is figurative first century language, and we shouldn't judge it through 21st century standards.

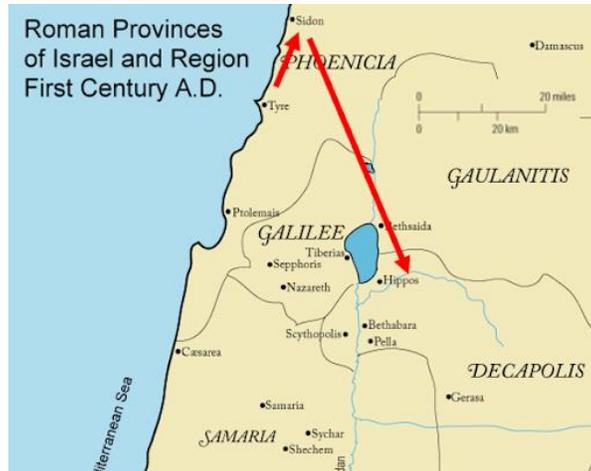
At any rate, if it helps, the word Jesus uses for "dogs" is more like "doglets" or "puppies." These pets are allowed to have scraps under the table. Jesus is simply saying there's a priority here, and she's not (yet) on the top of the list.

What helps me most is that the woman is not offended by Jesus' response. Some even think Jesus intentionally prompts her spirited reply. She knows she has no right to demand. She's pleading persistently and she'll give it one more try. At least he gave her the dignity of addressing her. Most Jewish rabbis wouldn't have done that.

"Lord" (we shouldn't read too much into "Lord"; it probably means "Sir"), she answers, "Even the doglets eat crumbs the children drop" (28).

Jesus is impressed. "For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter" (29). This is not the only time that Jesus heals from a distance, but it still feels strange to me. The woman "went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone" (30).

The next strange part of our reading is in verse 31. Jesus has decided to go back home. To get there, he “went through Sidon” (31). That’s like saying, “Jesus left Statesville to return to Hickory, and went through Winston-Salem.” The point is probably that he is deliberately avoiding Galilee (home, remember), traveling around the east side of the Sea. He heads “into the region of the Decapolis.”



Once again, this is strange. The Decapolis indicates ten Greek cities to the east of Galilee and Perea. The word only occurs in the Gospels three times. In Matthew 4:25 we learn that people from the Decapolis heard about Jesus and followed him. In Mark 5:20, we learn that a demoniac from the eastern shore of Galilee went into the Decapolis to tell that Jesus had healed him. Mark 7:31 is the only time we learn that Jesus went there. It’s strange. Having just said his ministry was to the children and not to the doglets, Jesus heads next to the puppy farm.

Matthew tells us that Jesus healed lots of people there – lame, crippled, blind, and mute. Mark focuses on only one. He’s the only Gospel writer who tells the story of this one. As with the Greek woman in Tyre (as well as the paralytic in chapter 2), it is both the faith and action of others that prompts the miracle, not the person who needs the healing. That seems strange, too. Shouldn’t Jesus require the individual to have faith? Didn’t the little girl have to have faith? Can faith be vicarious?

The man is both deaf and unable to talk (the two disabilities probably connected), although we don’t know for how long. From birth? Or from an illness or injury in his childhood or even recently? Once again, the word “begged” is used (32), but they seem superstitious. They don’t ask for healing; they ask for a touch. Strange.

Then comes the strangest part of all. Jesus takes this man, and probably to distinguish himself from charlatans who act dramatically in public for attention, Jesus takes the man “away from the crowd” (33). He sticks his fingers in the man’s ears and, if that’s not strange enough, spits (apparently into his hand) and touches the man’s tongue with his saliva (33). Nothing happens right away. Don’t you find *that* strange?

Then Jesus looks up to heaven and sighs deeply. He speaks to the man in Aramaic. That’s not so strange, since that was most likely his everyday language. There are only a few places in the Gospels where the Aramaic words are in the text, and this is one of them. “*Ephphatha!*” looks strange to us, but “ph” is one letter in Aramaic, comparable to our “f,” and we do double the “f” in words like “effort.” So this is

“Effatha!” which Mark tells us means, “Open up!” Right away the man’s ears and mouth are “loosened.” He can hear and he can speak plainly.

Then Jesus gives another strange command: “Don’t tell anyone!” (36). That would seem especially difficult for the man who can talk for the first time in who knows how long. He would naturally be very excited, unable to contain himself. In any case, he can’t just go around acting as if nothing had happened. People are going to naturally ask, “How can you talk?” Is he to act like he’s mute at that point and say nothing?

Apparently Jesus continues emphasizing this “no talking,” but people do it all the more (36). Why? That takes us to Part 2 of my “strange and wonderful” sermon.

Wonderful

Sometimes the strangest phenomena are the most wonderful. Where Mark leaves us at the end of these two stories is not with “strange” but “wonderful.”

Verse 37 says that because Jesus “even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak,” these “people were overwhelmed with amazement.” In Greek there are two compound words back-to-back. The first word is an adverb that all by itself means “superabundantly” or “hyper-exceedingly.” The second word is an adjective which means “utterly amazed” or “gaping with astonishment.” Any one of these words means “wonderful” almost by itself. Instead you have four words that, when you string them together, mean the witnesses were “hyper-exceedingly utterly amazed.”

When was the last time you were that excited about what God has done? If you finish reading these stories and ponder only the “strange” part, you’ve missed Mark’s purpose in telling them. Mark wants you to be totally, absolutely, thoroughly, excitedly, breathlessly, enthusiastically captivated by how wonderful Jesus is!

So what is it that makes these strange stories so wonderful?

First, there’s nothing Jesus can’t do. The stories in the Gospels are not designed to give us the impression that Jesus was or is a miracle-worker on demand. There are places he explicitly refused to do miracles. These passages infer the same thing in a different way. Mark tells us Jesus went through a vast swath of Gentile areas – Tyre, Sidon, western Galilee, and the Decapolis, but Mark records Jesus only cast one demon out of one little girl and healed one deaf and mute man. Surely there had to be hundreds or thousands in need. Jesus healed two.

The two strange stories convey his absolute power. Whether you are mystified by what internal symptoms (demons) or immobilized by external symptoms (deaf and mute), these stories teach us that Jesus has authority over both. This is why those witnesses were “hyper-exceedingly utterly amazed.” Mark keeps giving us example after example of what Jesus can do to prove that he can do anything.

Second, there's no one beyond his reach. It's not coincidental that these stories follow Jesus' controversy with the Pharisees over what is "clean" and "unclean" in 7:1-23. The Pharisees were under the assumption that God cares most about what enters your body – as in, eating food without ceremonially washed hands. (Some of you are probably just as fastidious with germophobia, but that's not what's in view here. Nor is he addressing bacteria or viruses. Different subject.)

Jesus' answer is that contamination is inside out, not outside in. Unclean *food* passes through the body. Evil *hearts* produce sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, envy, and so on. Mark's commentary is that in saying this, Jesus himself directly "declared all foods clean" (7:19).

Mark then tells these two stories about Jesus deliberately going into "unclean" areas and healing "unclean" people. These stories played out beyond the watchful eye of Jesus' enemies, but they would have been even more angered with Jesus' entering a pagan home in Tyre or touching the ears and tongue of a guy in the Decapolis than they were with his association with tax collectors and prostitutes. What's he thinking?

I'll tell you what he's thinking. He's thinking those distinctions you make about people who are unworthy or unwelcome are not his distinctions. Who do you think Jesus doesn't want in your pew? Who do you think Jesus can't or won't meet right where they are? There's no more dramatic story in the Gospels than this one to display Jesus' willingness to meet people right where they are no matter who they are or what they've done or what anyone else thinks of them. We can do no less.

Finally, he has a plan and you can't mess it up. What strikes us about Jesus' words and actions is their deliberateness. He's going to do what he's going to do, and ultimately that means he's going to the cross to suffer and die for the sins of the world. We'll get to that passage next week, and when we do we'll encounter his demands for abandoned discipleship. He's going to the cross, and he wants us to follow.

Meanwhile, I love the fact that Mark records people didn't do what Jesus asked them to do but it didn't change the outcome. I need that word of grace. I need to know that the accomplishment of his mission is not dependent on my obedience. I didn't say it doesn't matter if I'm obedient. It matters very much. But my response does not change who Jesus is and what he can do.

There's been disobedience all over this world, this nation, this church, your life, this year, this week, this morning. And you should confess and repent. And when you see it in someone else, you should at least pray, and possibly confront if he so leads you and you've admitted and removed the log in your own eye. But you should never think you are important enough to alter God's plans or thwart his promises.

Isn't Jesus wonderful? Here's what I learn from these two strange stories: His power is unlimited. His reach is boundless. His plan is unchangeable. Amen.