

## ***Be Opened!***

Text: Mark 7:24-37

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September 5, 2021

*"Where did we come from? Are we alone in the universe? Is there a God? These are some of the great unanswered questions of our time, though none perhaps greater than this one: Who let the dogs out?"*

Woof. Woof. Woof. Woof.

Ben Sisto is mostly joking when he says those words in the documentary, *Who Let the Dogs Out*, which premiered in March 2019.<sup>1</sup>

Yes, there is an entire documentary dedicated to the indelible earworm sung by the one-hit wonder group called the Baha Men. The cacophonous clangs of steel drums and club beats that, thanks to its seemingly nonsensical chant and hook, blanketed the entire universe in calypso barking during its radio reign in the summer of 2000.

The song, played often in professional sports venues hit the charts in 20 countries, and rose to #1 in Australia, New Zealand and the UK; and went Platinum in Sweden, the UK and Australia. It even took home a Grammy in 2001 for "Best Dance Recording."

All of this is pretty amazing considering that, in 2007, "Who Let the Dogs Out?" was placed at number 3 amongst Rolling Stone's list of "The 20 Most Annoying Songs". Many other music critics seem to feel essentially the same about the tune.

What's most surprising, though, is learning that songwriter Anselm Douglas called the song a man-bashing<sup>2</sup> (or perhaps, if flipped) a women's empowerment song as it's illustrating a scenario akin to sexual harassment prompting women to call men "dogs"—definitely not a positive moniker.

Which makes us think, "Wait a minute! Did Jesus call the woman in today's reading - a dog?!" In short, the answer is, "Yes, he did." This is a very troubling passage to us because being that rude, even cruel, to someone is not how we like to think of Jesus. In fact, it is not usually how Jesus is portrayed at all by the writers of the gospels. It sure makes us gasp, or wince, or both.

That is not to say that Jesus never has harsh words. He does. It's just that the harsh words he speaks are usually spoken to powers and principalities and people in charge of things. It's never, except on this occasion, to an individual... to a woman who is desperate to see her child healed. She is vulnerable, an outsider, she has no power, and is not part of an inner circle. She simply needs the healing touch of God for her child. To her, Jesus says, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." (Mark 7:27 NRSV).

So, we need to pause and wonder, "what does this mean?" Honestly, when I first read the gospel for today, my inclination was to choose a different Scripture! That certainly would have been

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<sup>1</sup> (Fallon 2019)

<sup>2</sup> (Shelton 2019)

easier than answering this difficult question. Yet, here we are – struggling to wrestle some meaning out of this perplexing text. Perhaps we can figure out what is going on here.

Let's begin with some context and see if that helps. There are some underlying tensions. In particular, a cultural tension between the Hebrew people and the Gentiles in the region. It has been going on a long time. Since the time of David and Goliath, we have heard Hebrew writers use the term *dog* to refer to opponents, enemies or non-Jews in general.<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, Jesus' use of the term *dog* did not come completely out of the blue. Still, it's harsh.

Let's look at the text right before this one to learn what Jesus was doing there to see if we can gain even more context. Jesus is in an ever-increasing, tense argument with the authorities in power – the Pharisees and some of the Sadducees. He has nothing good to say to them, perhaps ever, in the Gospels. In Mark Chapter 7, Jesus is calling out these religious leaders (Pharisees and scribes) for being more concerned about what is going on externally than what is going on internally. That is, he is unhappy that they seem more concerned about the appearance of things rather than the reality. They're more concerned with their own power and position than they are with actually doing the work that they're given to do. They're more concerned about upholding their ideas of "purity" and their judgement of those who do not conform to their standards of piety than they are about actually transforming people's lives. As the chapters come to a close, Jesus will lay out this criticism very clearly. Jesus is attempting to get those in power to see the people in front of them, and loosen their grip on the perceived boundaries dividing who is "in" and who is "out." That is to say that Jesus is trying to teach that social conventions ought not to get in the way of helping those in need.<sup>4</sup> This is the conflict Jesus is in when he has the conversation with the Syrophoenician woman.

Let's enter into the story again. Jesus left the place where the argument was playing out and went into the vicinity of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it. He could not keep his presence a secret, however, and as soon as the woman heard about him, she came and bowed down at Jesus' feet, begging him to cast the demon out of her daughter. We can sense her desperation, her determination... that of a fierce mother doing what she can to get help for her sick child.

We witness a bit of Jesus' humanity in his response, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." (Mark 7:27 NRSV). Children here refers to the "children" of Israel. The equivalent passage in Matthew (v. 27) reads, "I was only sent to the lost sheep of Israel." Jesus' point is that salvation would come first to the Jews (and later to the Gentiles).

However, seemingly not missing a beat, the woman's response is, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs" (Mark 7:28 NRSV). She understood Jesus' implication and was willing to settle for crumbs. This seems profound for at least four reasons. First, it is remarkable that she does not gasp or wince when she hears Jesus' rebuff. Second, she is smart to join him in the scenario he presents. Third, she is respectful, humble, yet persistent, and even bold: she will not take no for an answer. Finally, she holds on to hope, or perhaps has faith enough, or maybe

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<sup>3</sup> (Pidcock-Lester 2014, 206)

<sup>4</sup> (Ashton 2009, 46)

is OPEN enough to believe that even the crumbs of Jesus' compassion and love would be enough for healing.

The result? Jesus heals her daughter. He says, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter" (Mark 7:29 NRSV). I cannot help but wonder if this story is a kind of moment of transformation for Jesus himself. He seems to be changed by her actions. Perhaps he opens up to her presence when she does not allow his rebuff. Her unwillingness to be ignored, her persistence, her boldness perhaps shakes him from his human moment of physical and mental exhaustion.

I wonder if Jesus remembers the argument he was entangled in with the religious leaders and came to a certain awareness that his actions toward the Syrophenician woman were not dissimilar to the actions he was criticizing previously. Perhaps it is this Gentile woman who demonstrates to Jesus the true meaning of what he has just reminded his own followers in the verses prior: that social conventions should not stand in the way of helping those in need. Perhaps the Gospel writer placed the stories in this order to make a literary point. And there's more.

Despite Jesus' seeing this part of his mission being to the Jews, and not for the Gentiles just yet – it appears as if this may be a turning point in Jesus' ministry. You see, the second part of today's Scripture, the second miracle, also takes place in Gentile territory.

Let's enter into this story together. Some people brought a man who was deaf and could hardly talk to Jesus, and they begged Jesus to heal him. Jesus put his fingers into the man's ears. Then Jesus spat and touched the man's tongue. If we can get past how gross that action is, we get to the most compelling part of the story. Jesus looked up to heaven, sighed deeply and said "Ephphatha!" This is an Aramaic word which means "Be Opened!" This is the line from which I selected today's sermon title. The man's ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly.

It strikes me that this miracle story in which Jesus heals a deaf man is the one which immediately follows the turning point in Jesus' ministry. This is the first of several stories to follow of Jesus healing blindness or deafness. This also seems intentional on the part of the author of the Gospel.

I'd like to draw our attention to the words of prophesy in Isaiah 35:5-6 "Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer and the mute tongue shout for joy." This is a reference not only to the arrival of God's kingdom, but also to spiritual and physical healing being linked together in Jesus' ministry. Jesus was doing what God had promised to do when he came to redeem his people.<sup>5</sup>

The last bit of today's story... Although Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone, they were overwhelmed with amazement, and couldn't help but talk about it!

Most of us are reluctant to share our faith with others and we find very good reasons to keep quiet: we may believe that our actions speak more loudly than our words, we may be afraid of the inadequacy of our speech, or we may fear that we will make a mistake and alienate those to

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<sup>5</sup> (Kenneth Barker 1995, 1506)

whom we are speaking. Yet the healed man is every bit as insistent as the Syrophenician woman. He and his companions give voice to God's presence and power among them.

The characters in both stories embolden us to share whatever glimpse of God's mercy, love, compassion and truth we have witnessed. The proclamation of the Gospel is accompanied by spiritual healing and positive transformation in people's lives! When we respond to this Gospel in this way, our ears are opened and our tongues released!

Let's transform the earworm to:

Come on, Let God Out!

God. God. God. God.

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