

## More than enough to go around

Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast

Olentangy Church

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### Mark 7:24-37

*News about Jesus was getting around. He was a prophet, a teacher, a healer — maybe more! Crowds clung to him. He tried to get away, but it was no use. When he took his disciples into the wilderness, thousands of people followed, thousands of hungry people. Somehow there was plenty of food for them all. Jesus went from place to place, all around Galilee, healing, teaching, questioning unhelpful traditions. Then it was time to move on.*

From [Galilee, Jesus] left for the district around Tyre. He entered a house and didn't want anyone to know, but he wasn't able to hide. And, just like a that, a woman whose daughter had an unclean spirit heard about him, came, and fell at his feet. Now the woman was Greek, her people Syrophenician. She asked him to throw the demon out of her daughter. But he said to her, "First let the children be fed. It's not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." She had an answer. She told him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her, "Because you said that, go. The demon has come out of your daughter." She went home and found the child lying on the bed and the demon gone.

When [Jesus] came back from the district around Tyre, he went by way of Sidon toward the sea of Galilee, to the middle of the Decapolis district. [People] brought someone to him who couldn't hear or speak, and they begged [Jesus] to put his hand on him. So he took him off to the side privately, away from the crowd. Then he put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then he looked up to heaven, heaved a sigh, and said to him, "Ephphatha!" That means, "Open up!" And, just like that, his ears were opened, and his tongue was untied and he began to speak normally. [Jesus] ordered them not to tell anyone. But as much as he ordered them, they announced it even more instead. They were completely amazed and said, "He has done everything well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak."

### Sermon

The subject of multi-tasking came up yesterday at Men's Breakfast. Apparently some people can pull off at least some forms of multi-tasking. Whether by temperament or training, they can divide their attention, divide their attention and still function reasonably well. Generally we parents have our doubts about that, especially when it comes to our kids being able to focus on their homework while listening to their iPod and keeping up with two I.M. conversations.

On a different multi-tasking front, I'm sure we've all heard about the research by now, that people cannot successfully divide their attention between a cell phone conversation and driving down Bethel Road. Hands free phone or not, it doesn't work. You may as well be driving drunk! And text messaging while you drive? That's even worse.

Me? I'm not much of a multi-tasker. Jan will tell you that. In my more arrogant moments, I think I'm like Charles Emerson Winchester III from the old TV series M\*A\*S\*H: "I do one thing at a time, I do it extremely well, and then I move on." Regardless, I'm no multi-tasker. And I'm not alone in that.

**Jesus was nothing if not focused.** His focus was on his own people, Israel, and his mission to them. In a starving world, he had been sent to feed the children of Israel. In a world gone astray, he had been sent to find the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Mt. 15:24). So, when he sent out the twelve to extend the reach of his ministry, he told them, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Mt. 10:6). And so Jesus was not about to let himself be distracted.

That Syrophenician woman asked for help, for a blessing. It was not an unreasonable request. She had heard about Jesus and the wonderful things he had done in Galilee. And now here he was in Tyre, in her own neighborhood. How could she not go to him? She came to him humbly, abasing herself before him. She didn't know if he would help, but it was worth a try. She had to try. Her daughter was in a desperate

situation. Something — what could it be but some vile, spiritual force? — something had taken hold of her daughter. So the woman fell at Jesus' feet and begged him for help. And Jesus' heart was filled with compassion and . . .

Oh, sorry. That was the stereotype. Actually, Jesus told the woman to buzz off. He had a purpose, a mission. He was not about to be distracted from that. He was not about to use up valuable and limited resources, he was not about to use up himself, for some Gentile! He had come for Israel, for the children. It was their bread. He was their messiah. That was Jesus' mission. That was his focus. He was not interested in some multi-tasking ministry to Jews and Gentiles.

**Yet he wasn't maniacal about this focus.** He wound up helping the woman and her daughter. He sparred with the woman briefly (he liked what he saw in her), and he helped her daughter, sending the demon packing. And then there was the deaf-mute in the Decapolis. The Decapolis was a thoroughly Hellenistic district, a place for Jesus to get away from Jewish crowds with their messianic dreams and expectations, a place for him to wind down. Yet here, too, he had a reputation. But when presented with the deaf-mute, he didn't hesitate. Right away he healed him, using some theatrical gestures: poking his fingers into the man's ears, spitting on the ground, touching the man's tongue, looking up, heaving a sigh. But this time there was no objection from Jesus about wasting himself on Gentiles. Jesus was focused, but you almost get the sense that sometimes he couldn't help himself.

A favorite incident for me in Mark's gospel is Jesus' visit to Nazareth. He gets a very chilly reception there. Mark says that Jesus was "amazed at their lack of faith" (Mk. 6:6). But he also says this, "Jesus could not do any powerful deeds there, except that he laid his hand on a few sick people and cured them" (Mk. 6:5). He couldn't do any . . . except for a few. It's as if Jesus couldn't help himself. He had come to make things right. That included making people whole. And that's just what he did, even if his focus on the children of Israel got a little blurred.

**Which was okay, because his narrow focus had a wide purpose.** Put simply, Jesus was sent to Israel for the world. Put a little differently, Jesus was sent to Israel for the sake of Israel's calling (and Abraham's calling) to be a blessing to the world. The world was lost, not just the lost sheep of the house of Israel. The world was hungry, not just the children of Israel. The world was in need of blessing, not just Israel. God had promised that blessing, and that blessing would come through Jesus. When Jesus blessed the Syrophenician woman's daughter and when he opened the Decapoltan man's ears and untied his tongue, those deviations from his focus expressed the ultimate purpose of his focus. They did so in several ways.

Just before these two stories, Mark tells us how Jesus shook the ground beneath Israel's feet. Everyone in Israel knew that the basic division in the world was between Jew and Gentile, between clean and unclean. But Jesus had called that division into question. And now here we have Jesus confronted by a woman, an unclean Greek woman, whose daughter has an unclean spirit. And he metaphorically shares food ("the children's bread") with them, expressing and enacting the coming end to that basic division, when Jew and Gentile, who simply did not eat together, would become one in Christ. There we have Jesus' focus and its purpose: to Israel for the world.

Then there's the story in the Decapolis, summarized this way: "He makes the deaf hear and the mute speak." This is not random language, nor merely descriptive. This is evocative language. It's Isaiah 35 language. [Look it up!] It's the language of Israel's renewal and restoration after a long exile. It's the language of God pouring out blessing on Israel as the first step toward blessing all the world. Jesus had been sent to Israel to bring God's future by his life, death, and resurrection in Israel. At last the new day was dawning, when everything would be restored. Creation would be set free. The blind would see. The crippled would jump and dance. That was Jesus' focus, for Israel and for the world, a narrow focus with a wide purpose.

**Now, I've been trying to figure out what all of this means for the church.** Two things come to mind. I'm sure there are many more. But there are at least these two.

First, while distractions and diversions don't need to be avoided at all costs, yet there must be, for the church, a focus of some kind. Jesus was sent with a focus. That's a given. And when he says, "As the Father

sent me, so I am sending you” (John 20:21), that implies a focus, I would think, for the church. And I imagine that, while the holy catholic and apostolic church has its overall focus, to announce and embody the great renewing, reconciling work of God in Jesus Christ, so too a particular congregation would have a particular focus, a way to be the church of Jesus Christ in its particular time and place, a way that may be rather narrow, which is to say, rather focused.

The church council has begun to wonder again about that focus for this church. We recognize our small numbers, and that they’re getting smaller. We recognize demographic trends that we cannot resist. We recognize our inability to be everything we once were, and especially our inability to be a reincarnation of the churches of our childhood. But we’re not ready to give up. I think we may be getting ready to focus.

At last Thursday’s council meeting, I suggested a potentially sacrilegious analogy. Imagine a full-service restaurant. For years it has served breakfast, lunch, and supper every day, always a full menu. But business has been falling off for some time now. Breakfast is all right. But the lunch crowd has thinned. And suppertime? Forget about it! What can the restaurant owners do? They can keep on offering full-menu breakfast, lunch, and supper every day. They can never change a thing, because that’s what a restaurant is, never change a thing until the ship sinks. Or they can re-invent the restaurant. Perhaps instead of a full-service, full-menu restaurant, it will become a specialty coffee and pastry shop, serving coffees of all sorts along with selected sweets. Is it the same restaurant it used to be any more? No. Is it still a restaurant of sorts? Yes, absolutely!

Can a church be re-invented? Instead of crying over what it can no longer do or be or offer, can a church focus on one thing that it can do and do well? Can it do that and still be a church, do that and still see itself as a church? Not that there wouldn’t be deviations and distractions from that one thing, but can a church not be one, focused thing?

I said there were two things that came to mind regarding Jesus’ narrow focus and wide purpose and what that means for the church. Here’s the second one: There is no shortage of bread. There is no shortage of bread.

Jesus tells the Syrophenician woman, “It’s not right to throw the children’s bread to the dogs.” The implication is that there’s not enough bread to waste any on dogs. The woman replies, “Even dogs get the children’s crumbs.” The implication is, “We can get by on scraps and waste if that’s all there is.”

But Mark tells two stories, one shortly before and one shortly after this brief episode. In the first, 5,000 men, plus women and children, are fed using five small loaves of bread and some fish. And there are twelve baskets full of leftovers. In the second, 4,000 men, plus women and children, are fed using seven small loaves of bread. And there are seven baskets of leftovers.

For the work Jesus has been sent to do, there is no shortage of resources. For the hungry, there is plenty of bread. For the sick, there is plenty of healing. For the sinful, there is plenty of forgiveness. An implication, I think, is this: We have plenty with which to do the focused task that God has for us to do. There is no shortage of the necessary resources.

Right now the church council is looking for stories, stories about small, struggling churches that were re-invented, that found a focus, that found a better way to be faithful. If you know any stories like that, let us know. Meanwhile, we’ll be hunting for those stories ourselves, with the hope and prayer that sooner rather than later we’ll find something, find one thing, find God’s one thing, to be our focus. Because even if our former, multi-tasking church days are over, there may yet be one task that God has for us to do.