

The Hands and Feet of Jesus  
Mark 7:24-37  
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)  
September 16, 2018  
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She is standing in the line at the grocery store, waiting, somewhat impatiently, for the transaction ahead of her to be completed so she can get on with her day. Rather than staring down the cashier, she turns her attention to the magazine rack. Headlines about movie stars and athletes, politicians and billionaires abound. Then something catches her attention. From behind the wire rack a small child, dirty, with a protruding belly, looks out at her. Famine. Halfway around the world. All the while she stands in line at a grocery store with too many choices preparing to pay for a cart full of food, some of which she will inevitably throw away. But what can she do?

He is in a hurry. It has been one of those mornings. The kind of morning that has grown ever more common since his daughter turned two. “Me do it,” are her favorite words. But for her daddy, these words simply mean he might be late for work again. And yet he loves these mornings with her and he loves watching her become more capable. He especially loves seeing the joy on her face when she gets her sweater on all by herself. But now she’s been dropped off...he’s working hard to follow the speed limit. If everything goes just right, he’ll be at his desk before his co-worker. Then the light turns red. And sitting there is woman, dirty and thin, with a sign that says, “Anything helps.” He wonders to himself – is she a con artist? Does she have a real need? What if she does and he, with his good job and new car and happy life, just drives by? What can he do? What should he do?

If we are paying attention there are people all around us who are in need. Not all of them show up on magazine covers. Not all of them sit at corners along our drive to work. Not all of

them even look like they have needs. And too often, even when they do, we have built up such barriers that we are easily able to pass by, to talk ourselves out of helping, to not even listen to their stories, to not even notice their need.

And yet so many of the stories of Jesus are stories of him pausing, looking people in the eye, and responding, helping, healing.

In today's reading we heard two stories of Jesus healing people. And there are many ways in which these two stories are similar, as well as some significant ways in which they differ from each other.

In the first story, a woman comes to him. She is a Gentile. She comes on behalf of her daughter. Her combined love for her daughter and confidence in Jesus work together to give her the courage to stand up for her cause when she is first turned down. While Jesus' first impulse is not to give her the time of day, because of the mother's bravery Jesus tells her to return to her daughter and she will find that the child has been healed.

In the second story, a deaf man with a speech impediment is brought to Jesus. Again, it is others who beg Jesus' attention. But this time Jesus responds, seemingly immediately. And this time he heals through touch, though not as a public act; instead he takes the man aside. He touches the man and, in those acts, "his ears were opened, his tongue was released."<sup>1</sup> And in spite of Jesus' insistence that they not talk about this, they – seemingly the friends and the healed man – couldn't stop talking about what Jesus had done.

When we look at today's reading we may have many reactions. There are questions. Questions that range from "Why was Jesus not more welcoming of the Gentile woman?" to "Was his response about testing her or was her response what changed him, what opened his

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 7:35, NRSV.

worldview a little wider?” Questions that range from, “Why did spit have to be involved in that second healing?” to “Did he respond quicker the second time because the one needing healing was a man, was a Jewish person, or maybe just because Jesus had learned something?” There are many questions and many that we would do well to spend some time with.

But, for all the questions that arise, at the end of this reading we are left with two more reminders that responding to the needs of others, though not always easy even for Jesus, is at his core. While it seems, especially in the first story that “Mark is showing us that the incarnation is not a cakewalk,”<sup>2</sup> still Jesus gets there. Even as he is blinded by his mission...even as he has to readjust his thinking...even as he has to pause in a new way and think about the one in front of him differently than he first did...still Jesus gets there.

And this is important for us to be reminded of. Because we, too, live in a world filled with people who have needs. At the root of their needs may be a range of things from poverty to hunger; from mental illness to unemployment; from a broken relationships to insufficient housing. And the ones we may be responding to might be a stranger or friend, even an enemy or someone living in our own home. But at the end of the day, as those who claim to be followers of Jesus, we are called to respond.

And in many ways it is good that we have both of these stories that Beth read to us today, because together they show us the complexity. Not only do we see in Jesus a person who is more eager to respond in one situation than another, we also see in his methods the reality that response happens in various ways. Not only do we see in Jesus someone who needs to be reminded that his mission may be bigger than he hopes, we also see someone who is willing to take time out of his busy schedule and to focus on the one who is in front of him.

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<sup>2</sup> Loye Bradley Ashton, *Feasting on the Word, Year B Volume 4* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 48.

And we need this because sometimes we don't know how to respond. Sometimes we simply don't want to respond. Sometimes the response that is needed isn't exactly what is asked for or isn't exactly what we hope to offer. Sometimes we have to find our way to openness, or get out of our own way so that God can move through us. Sometimes we have to set aside our own mission and just pay attention to the people around us.

Because while we can appreciate the complexity of the questions...while we know how difficult it can be to respond and to know that what we are doing matters...while we sometimes don't know if or how we can help...we can take comfort in the fact that Jesus seemed to face these same dilemmas.

And meanwhile, while we might want to let these be excuses to not respond, the other thing that these stories do is to show us that we aren't let off the hook just because we aren't sure what to do. Rather, just as the woman called Jesus to his best self, our faith calls us to our best self as well. These stories remind us that just as Jesus was called, we who follow him are called as well. These stories remind us that just as the reach of his response was intended to be wide, so is ours because all people are God's children.

We are reminded by New Testament scholar Mitzi Minor that "Jesus' actions illustrated that a 'worthless, Gentile girl whose mind was devoured by a demon' and a 'good for nothing deaf man who couldn't even speak clearly' were indeed children of God to be embraced and valued. [This] 'calls forth [our] recognition that there are no external barriers between God and any human being: not race, class, ethnicity, gender, age, or physical condition. Consequently, there should also be no such barriers between human beings.'"<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Amy C. Howe (quotes from Mitzi Minor), *Feasting on the Word, Year B Volume 4* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 48.

And so, we, like Jesus, are called to keep on keeping on. We are called to keep working through the things that stop us. We are called to keep working through our questions and hesitations, even through our bigotries and prejudices. And we are called to share the resources we have – resources of compassion and food, of friendship and support – with those we meet.

This year with the help of the Mission & Witness team we have been focusing on hunger. We have had some opportunities to respond already this year. We have another coming up in two weeks as a group of us participate in the Feed My Starving Children Food Pack. And today we are kicking off a new opportunity with the goal of filling an ark for Heifer International. As you heard in the Children's Moment, this organization has been working for over 70 years and works with a model of providing animals and caring for the earth in ways that help create a sustainable living not just for one family but empower whole communities including women.

We will continue to share more information about this project and will continue to watch our ark here in the sanctuary as we fill each of those portholes with a picture of an animal representing our efforts and the money we raise.

Meanwhile, we are reminded that we are called to be paying attention to the world and people around us and to respond to the needs we see, and sometimes those we would rather not see. And while we will sometimes do this through joint efforts like the food pack and filling the ark, this is not just through programs and projects. As people of faith, we who have more than we need are called to share – to give food, to give compassion, to give time, to give care. And we are called to be open to listen beyond our hesitation and our fear, beyond our questions and the answers we think we have. We are called to listen as Jesus did, to stop and be present as Jesus was, that in our time and place we may be his hands and his feet.

May it be so.