

## “LET’S PLAY FAIR”

Mark 7:24-37

September 8, 2024

As a child, did you ever have a special place that you liked to go to be alone? Perhaps you wanted to get some downtime away from your brothers and sisters. It could have been your bedroom, an attic space, the big tree in the backyard, a tree house, or someplace you could just hangout, be still, enjoy the quiet so you could think, read, decompress, and recharge.

Even as adults we create such places. It might be a big comfy chair in the family room, or a garage space where you work on a hobby. For others, it might be fishing on the lake or soaking in a swimming pool. It really doesn’t matter what your particular space looks like, but that you have somewhere to rest and recharge. Let’s be honest, interacting with people can be draining. We all need some downtime. No one knew this better than Jesus.

Mark tells us, **“From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre.”** Tyre was a famous Mediterranean harbor town north of Galilee. It is part of modern-day Lebanon, but in the time of Jesus it was the Phoenician homeland and famous for its seafaring people. They traveled all around the Mediterranean as far away as Britain and down the coast of Africa. It was a prosperous island town.

Most importantly, Tyre was non-Jewish territory. Jesus is getting out of town, away from the crowds, for awhile to be alone with his disciples and prepare for his final journey to Jerusalem. At least, that was his plan. **Mark writes, “He entered a house and did not want anyone to know**

**he was there. Yet he could not escape notice.**” In 2018, a TV series came out called **The Price of Fame**. It was an hour-long program that gave viewers an intimate perspective on the amazing and devastating public and private events of celebrities and the hefty price they paid for their fame. One of those prices is the ability to lead a normal life, outside the public eye. By this time, Jesus had become famous. Even though there wasn't any social media, TV, Radio, Instagram, word had gotten around. People knew what Jesus looked like. He had become a celebrity in that part of the world. His reputation as a Healer, rabble rouser, teacher, and prophet had preceded him, even in non-Jewish territory.

**“Yet, he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet.”** So much for not being noticed! In one sentence we learn this woman was a Gentile, a member of the local ethnic community, and that her daughter is sick. She begs Jesus to heal her possessed daughter.

What we may not know is in the culture of the time. Reputable women did not approach men in public, Jews and Gentiles avoided each other as much as possible, and rabbis avoided women, especially ones with spiritually unclean children. Yet, this woman dares to cross all the cultural barriers and risk ridicule and rejection. Why? Because she loved her daughter and was desperate for help. She would not be turned away.

In answer to the woman's request Jesus tells her, **“Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to**

**the dogs.”** That response seems rather rude! Of course, we are missing the tone in which Jesus spoke. Did he reply with irritation for the interruption? Did he say it with a hint of humor? Was he trying to put the women in her place? Was Jesus actually opening the door for a conversation or opportunity for faith? We don't really know! What we do know is the earthly mission focus of Jesus was to the Jewish people. What we do know is referencing a person to dog status, however tongue in cheek, was insulting. What we do know is Jesus' response is blunt and less than compassionate.

However, this unnamed woman is not discouraged. She will face insults, being cast out, rebuff, or whatever humiliating experience to save the life of her child. She is sharp minded and quickly replies, “**Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.**” Reference point: coarse bread was often used as napkins then thrown to the family dogs. This mom reminds Jesus that even the Gentiles benefit from God's graciousness. This insight must have brought a smile to Jesus. He responds to her faith, “**For saying that, you may go, the demon has left your daughter.**” The girl is cured. The woman's persevering faith and understanding of God's grace is what triggers the healing.

Her story is followed by another healing story about a man with a speech impediment and deafness. Jesus very intimately heals this man. Although, different in nature both the woman's daughter and this man are made whole. These are the last two healing stories for the Galilean ministry of Jesus. What is their importance to us?

## I. MINISTRY OF FOCUS

Once upon a time, there was a student named Emily who struggled with staying focused during study sessions. She was easily distracted by her phone, social media, and even her own thoughts. Despite her best efforts, Emily found herself procrastinating and losing focus frequently. Her grades were slipping, and she felt frustrated and overwhelmed. One day, she received a low score on an important test, and it was a wake-up call for her.

Emily started experimenting with different methods for staying focused during her study sessions. She turned off her phone, found a quiet place to study, and set specific goals for each session. She also started taking regular breaks to refresh her mind and avoid burnout. To her surprise, these simple changes made a big difference.

As Emily became more focused, she found that she was retaining more information and completing her work more efficiently. She also felt more confident and motivated as she saw her grades improve. Learning became a joy and not drudgery.

The first thing these healing stories remind us of is the importance of **focus**. **Jesus had a focus**. His primary earthly mission was with the people of Israel. After the resurrection it was the Holy Spirit and the early Church's mission to take the good news out in the world. It wasn't that Jesus wasn't flexible and he certainly expanded the work of God's grace beyond Israel, but calling the Israelites to the Kingdom of God's reign was his primary focus, not the healings.

Focus is important to our ministry and church life, if we desire impacting our community and world. That focus may be on fellowship, advocacy, hunger, senior citizens, discipleship, worship, and any number of ministry areas. But play to the gifts, strengths, resources, and calling God has given us so we might be effective in our ministry. Attempting to do it all usually means we end up doing very little and not well. Stay open to the Spirit's movement but keep focused in our ministry.

## II. CAN'T KEEP THE SECRET

Once a man received an opportunity to go ice fishing for the very first time. He gets to the river, drills the hole, drops in his line... and has no luck. Meanwhile, another guy, a little way upstream, is catching fish after fish.

**“Hey, what’s your secret?”** shouts the first man.

The second man waves and mumbles something.

**“Pardon, what was that?”** asked the first man. Another mumble.

The first man puts down his rod and walks closer. **“Sorry, it’s a bit windy and I still couldn’t hear you. You’re catching fish like crazy - what’s your secret?”**

The second man spits something into his cupped palms and holds it up to show the first man - a minnow. **“I said, you gotta keep your bait warm!”**

The Gospel of Mark is all about the **Messianic Secret**. This gospel is giving hints throughout, a healing here, a deliverance there, an amazing teaching, the calming of a sea, a parable that makes us think, and

wondering if the readers can guess who Jesus is. These healing stories bear witness to the fact that Jesus was connected to divine power. They bear witness that Jesus was no ordinary guy, but someone who is connected with the extraordinary. They reveal the presence of God's dynamic reign at work in Jesus. And if you still don't get it, in the very next chapter, this secret is finally made plain when Jesus asks his disciples, **"But who do you say that I am?"** And Peter replies, **"You are the Messiah."**

The **messianic secret** is no longer a secret. In the last verse of this passage the people say, **"He has done everything well;"** This is not a yearly Personnel Committee review comment, like you have done a good job, so we will give you a raise. No, this is a statement of faith. It bears witness that in Jesus the beauty of God's saving power and purpose is being unleashed among us. cvAnd now that we know the secret, we are confronted with how we respond to Jesus.

### **III. THE GOOD NEWS MUST BE SHARED**

**Rick Warren, in his book God's Purpose in Your Pain,** writes, "Many Christians believe God expects us to pretend to live a perfect life in front of our nonbelieving neighbors. Hide our problems. Mask our pain. Cover up our sins. The result is that Christians are labeled hypocrites and phonies. ... What if instead we did the exact opposite? What if we Christians were vulnerable, upfront, and honest about our mistakes, problems, and fears? That would be refreshing, authentic, and attractive. ... We think people are impressed by our prosperity. But actually, they're

more impressed with how we handle adversity. It's not our success but how we handle suffering that gives our witness credibility.

Many Christians think they only have one testimony: the story of how they came to faith in Christ. But your experience of pain is a potential testimony you can share. If you've ever lost a job, a home, a loved one, or a reputation and God helped you through, that's a testimony. The greatest witness of God's love in all of history was not Jesus' perfect life. It was not his teaching. It was not his miracles. The greatest witness of God's love was Christ's suffering on the cross.

None of us can control what happens to us in life. But we do get to choose our response. We can choose whether we will waste our pain or learn from it and use it to help others. Instead of asking yourself, "Why is this happening to me?" start asking God two other questions: "What do you want me to learn?" and "Whom do you want me to help?"

These healing stories feature people who are suffering, not succeeding. These people are not suffering in silence. They are seeking help, and Jesus gave it to them. **"Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one, but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it."**

This Gentile Woman and this Deaf man have a story to tell, and they must have told it often enough for it to end up in Mark's Gospel. They experienced the good news of God's grace and healing power, and they will not be quiet about it. Good news must be shared.

What is your story? What has Jesus done for you? What good news are you sharing that is lifting another up? Or are we failing to recognize what God has done and is doing in our lives. Every one of us has a story to tell, a focus for ministry, and a secret to share about Jesus. While we might need some time in our special get away place, that is not where we are to remain. Even Jesus had to reengage at some point. Amen.

**First Presbyterian Church in Hawley**  
**Sunday, September 8, 2024**  
**Second Scripture Lesson**

---

**Mark 7:24-37**

<sup>24</sup>From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, <sup>25</sup>but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. <sup>26</sup>Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. <sup>27</sup>He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." <sup>28</sup>But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." <sup>29</sup>Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." <sup>30</sup>So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

<sup>31</sup>Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. <sup>32</sup>They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. <sup>33</sup>He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. <sup>34</sup>Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." <sup>35</sup>And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. <sup>36</sup>Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. <sup>37</sup>They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."

This is the Word of the Lord.

**Thanks be To God.**