

Sermon for Sunday, September 9, 2012 Mark 7:24-37 "Word-Power"

Words have power. Dramatic political speeches can bring us to tears. A beautiful poem can transport us to an entirely different place. A word of encouragement can lift us up, over the hard task that faces us. Words have power.

Words also have the power to hurt. Someone calls you a bad name, and you're stuck rethinking the exchange for the rest of the day, imagining what you would have said as a snappy retort if only you could have thought of it in that moment. A posting on FaceBook or an opinion piece in the newspaper by someone who denigrates all people like you (fill in the blank: women, gays, gun owners, divorcees, people of color) makes you feel angry or soiled or shamed. Words have power.

So what happens when Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the anointed Messiah, says a word that shocks, that is meant to shame and denigrate, that is designed to make the person so addressed into an unclean unwanted intruder into the Lord's space?

Sure doesn't sound like the Jesus I love.

And yet this is precisely what happens in the first half of our gospel this morning. Jesus is confronted by a woman who is most definitely not an appropriate person for him to converse with – a SyroPhoenician woman. A Gentile, not a Jew, not accompanied by a man, as would have been the social norm in that time, a mother of a demon-possessed daughter. She asks him for healing for her daughter, and he responds "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." In other words, you're not one of the children. You're a dog, so you don't get any.

And what Jesus says, in point of fact, is not the word dog, it's the word that starts with a b, like that television program called "Don't Trust the B____ in Apt 23." It is most definitely not a nice word to call anyone. Words have power to hurt, to exclude, and this is what this word in this sentence in this place means. He is refusing her, and he is not only refusing her, he is demeaning and excluding and hurting her all at once.

And she gets up in his face – I can picture someone like Queen Latifah saying this – and says "Who are you calling a b____?" I can also fantasize, as my friend and Biblical Scholar Wil Gafney does, that she says "Does your mama know you're talking like that? Do you kiss your mama with that mouth?"

But this SyroPhoenician woman doesn't dress him down for calling her a bad name, she turns his words around on him.

Words have power, sometimes in very unexpected ways. I remember a gathering of a group of clergywomen. Some of the older ones started calling some of the younger women priests the EpiscoPuppies. They thought it was cute, but for these very competent, bright young women, it was demeaning. It made them feel like junior members of the gathering, like they were less than the older clergywomen. And the young women stewed about it for a while, and the next time they were addressed as EpiscoPuppies, one of them said "yes, and you know what EpiscoPuppies grow up to be? EpiscoB____s."

They turned around the power of the word that was intended to "put them in their place" and used it to defend themselves.

The SyroPhoenician woman follows a similar strategy. She says, "Yes, I may be a b____. You may think I'm less than nothing. But even those of us who are less than nothing get a little bit of something, the leftover crumbs, after all you fine and fancy folk get done with your banquet. And I am calling for my crumbs, right now."

And suddenly the ownership of power of the words shifts. She takes that awful word and uses its power to get Jesus to pay attention...and as the power dynamic shifts, it opens up Jesus' ears and heart to a new understanding of what his mission is. He is to care for all of the people, even the ones whom society calls dogs, even the ones who are untouchable, even the ones who belong to the enemy camp, even the ones who believe differently. He hears her, as he had never heard the voice of those who were outsiders before, and the word transforms him. It opens his ears.

How ironic, then, that the very next person who comes to him for healing is a deaf man who has no voice! That SyroPhoenician woman may have felt like that when Jesus called her that cruel name, naming her as someone who didn't hear the way that Jesus and his fellow Jews heard. Someone who had no voice. Like that woman, this deaf-mute is the ultimate outsider – he has no words.

He has no words.

I wonder if Jesus would have seen that deaf-mute in such stark relief as a person in need of words of his own had the Lord not experienced the power of words, the Lord who is often called the Word made flesh. I wonder if Jesus could have loved that poor deaf mute man back into hearing and speaking unless he himself, the Lord Jesus Christ, had had his own ears opened up by that crazy SyroPhoenician woman who got up in his face...

She used the words that he had thrown at her, not to defeat him, but to open him up to all that he was expected to do and be.

And he was forever changed by that. Suddenly, the importance of caring for the poor, the outsiders, the broken ones, became the heart of his mission. It was not simply a chance to reclaim confused Israelites for the One True God. The mission was now for all, and especially for those who were the unlikely ones. He was no longer the Word made flesh for the chosen people of the Hebrew Bible, he was the Word made flesh for the whole broken, conflicted, troubled world. Why not? Words, as we know, have power. And this Word, unfolded into its true and all-encompassing mission, had more power than we can possibly imagine to heal and hold and love and transform.

Our words are less powerful than that, to be sure. But the key to words and power is to know how to use them as Jesus finally did: to love and envelop and heal. And equally important, to listen and truly hear the cries of those who are in need.

Even the words that each of us say have some power. We know that hurtful words can damage. We know that words of love and encouragement can lift people up. That's a gift that words give us, a gift that makes us unique among God's creation. So how will we use that power? What words do we need to hear to open our own hearts so we can hear the words of others? What words do we need to expunge from our vocabularies to realize the kingdom of God? We have the power, if we choose. Choose wisely.

Amen.