

Be Opened
[Mark 7:24-37](#)
Rev. Curtis Bablitz
September 8, 2024

For most parents, summer vacation is exhausting. For two months, your children are out of school every day, and you need to figure out what you're going to do with them. They say that idle hands are the devil's playthings – you can't leave young children unattended for any length of time, or they hurt themselves or someone else or set something on fire or just generally cause mayhem and destruction. But you also have work that needs to get done, and ideally you want a little quiet time for yourself at some point so you don't go crazy. So if you want to make it through summer vacation, you need a plan, and you need to stick to the plan. Summer camp and swimming lessons and vacation bible school and play dates with friends, you need to plan out your entire summer schedule back in the spring so that every second on the calendar has something to fill it, so your children are too busy to cause trouble. As a parent, I understand this is essential, you need a plan, you need to follow the plan. But I also remember that as a kid, some of the best parts of summer were the parts that didn't follow a plan – where you wander off and explore the world around you, when you try something different you never tried before. You can plan out your life so perfectly that you never actually have any fun. Following the plan is important, but sometimes, you have to let the plan go and try something new.

And you can see that in the story we read from the Gospel of Mark this morning. At this point in the gospel, Jesus' ministry is a tremendous success; just about everywhere he goes, his reputation goes ahead of him, crowds gather to hear

him preach and teach and to see his works of power and healing in action. But alongside the crowds, there's been this slowly growing opposition – Jesus has been making enemies, and everywhere he goes, they're skulking in the background, just waiting for him to slip up, waiting for him to make one wrong move so they can expose him for the fraud that they're sure he really is. And between the crowds swarming him at every moment, and the troublemakers trying to destroy him, and his disciples missing the point of every lesson he tries to teach them, Jesus is exhausted. We sometimes forget that while yes, Jesus is the son of God, he is also fully and completely human, which means he gets tired walking all over the countryside trailing thousands of pushy miracle hounds and a few dozen spies behind him everywhere he goes. And so one day, after a particularly bitter confrontation with his enemies, Jesus decides it's time for a vacation. He sneaks off, leaves Galilee behind, and heads way up north, away from the provinces populated mostly by his fellow Jews, and up to the region around Tyre. This is Gentile country, a part of the world where hopefully news of his ministry hasn't reached yet, a place where he can hopefully find a little peace and quiet. He checks in to a little Bed and Breakfast in the countryside, gives a fake name to the host, puts on a baseball hat and sunglasses and goes out to sit by the pool with a fancy drink in a coconut and a book he's really been meaning to finish, and finally, finally, Jesus can have a little time for Jesus. And he's just getting settled and comfortable, taking that first sip of his cold drink, when who should show up at his secluded hideaway but a very determined woman who is not going to take no for an answer. Her daughter is sick, tormented by evil and trouble and pain, and this woman has nowhere to go, no hope of ever finding help for her daughter, when who should she happen to run into, right there in her own hometown, but the famous healer, Jesus of Nazareth. It's meant to be. So she throws herself at Jesus'

feet, making a big scene in front of everyone, begging Jesus to come and heal her daughter.

Now, if you've grown up in the church, heard a Sunday School lesson or two, Jesus' answer to the woman might come as a bit of a surprise. We think that Jesus is this big cuddly softy who of course is going to help someone in need if they ask him for help. How can he say no? He's Jesus. Helping is what he does. But the thing is, Jesus knows very well that he's there on earth for a reason: to save all humanity from sin and death. That means that all of his ministry, all the healings, miracles and amazing acts of power he's been doing all over Galilee, all of that is just a means to an end. It's all part of a bigger plan, God's plan, that will lead Jesus to Jerusalem, to Calvary, to the cross and the empty tomb. And according to that plan, Jesus is supposed to first reach out to the Jewish people, the children of Abraham, his own people, the people who have been following God for thousands of years and expecting the Messiah to come all that time. It's only later that his plan will expand to the Gentiles, all the other, non-Jewish peoples outside the covenant God made with Abraham so many years ago. God promised to bless Abraham and his children so that they could be a blessing to the rest of the world, and Jesus was God's fulfillment of that promise. So according to that plan, Jesus blesses Abraham's children and then they'll pass on those blessings to all the Gentiles. And this pushy lady hassling Jesus on his day off is a Gentile. So helping her out just isn't part of the plan – not yet. And that's what Jesus tells her, with some pretty blunt language. Sorry lady, but there's a plan here – the children get to eat first before the dogs. Things have to be done decently and in good order – I'm just following the rules, and the rules say you have to wait your turn. I promise my church will get to you in, oh, say, five or ten years.

And that should've been the end of it. Jesus knows what he's supposed to do, he knows the plan he's been given, and of course he's going to follow that plan to the letter. He's not going to change his mind. This Gentile woman is out of luck. But she doesn't give up. She persists, she comes right back at Jesus with a perfect answer – yes, the children eat before the pets, but if the dogs get a scrap here and there, what's the harm? I know there's a plan, but would it really interfere with your great cosmic plan by helping out one little Gentile a few years early? And Jesus is so impressed by her determination and her faith that right then and there, he changes his mind. He changes the plan. He heals the woman's daughter, right there on the spot. And that's not all. When his vacation is over and Jesus heads back to Galilee, he takes the long road back through the region of the Decapolis, which is all Gentile country. And while he travels, he heals. He reaches out to the Gentiles, and when he meets a Gentile man who can't hear or speak, this time Jesus doesn't turn him away, he doesn't explain the master plan to him, outlining all the reasons he can't get healed. This time, Jesus just reaches out and touches him, he says Ephphatha – Be Opened. And the man is healed. Jesus reacts to his encounter with the Gentile woman by changing the plan, not just once but over and over again, opening up his power and love and grace so that all can come for healing, even the outcasts, even the Gentiles. God's plan of salvation for all humanity, first for the Jews and then for the Gentiles, that plan is still in place, but Jesus opens that plan up a little wider to let his grace move in unexpected ways, in unexpected people, so that his healing can move beyond what the plan was supposed to be. Jesus follows God's plan for his life, but he doesn't let that plan stand in the way of working in the world to heal and to restore, to open eyes and ears, hearts and minds, to open up lives to receive the grace and power of Almighty God.

And I think that's a story we need to hear, here in our world, now more than ever. As God's people, God's representatives here in this place, we have been given a plan to follow, a guide on how to live and act in the world so that the people around us will see God's love at work in us. We build up the church, and the church builds up the world; we use the gifts we've been given so that as many people as possible can share in the grace we've been blessed with. And yet following that plan isn't always easy. There are all sorts of obstacles in our way, all sorts of barriers that slow us down, and even when we're doing our best, it can feel like growing God's church and blessing the world around us is just impossible. We feed all these hungry people, but the next week, there's even more. We try to tell people about the love of Jesus Christ, but fewer and fewer people want to listen; they react with hostility or indifference. We want to tell the world a story of hope for the future, the story of Jesus Christ conquering sin and death, but then we read the news, and sin and death are still everywhere, school shootings and warfare and endless political bickering, and it sure doesn't seem like the plan is working, like we're getting any closer to being the people we think we're supposed to be. And when you're tired and frightened, it is easy to look at the world around and see only enemies, only 'the other', and you start to close off your heart to the cries of those in need, you start thinking there won't be enough blessings to go around so we need to keep them all for ourselves. And that isn't how we are meant to live. As the church of Jesus Christ, as those called by his name and claimed by his love, we are still called to bless the world around us in everything we do, still called to represent his love to everyone we meet, to keep our hearts open so that the power of Christ's Spirit can move in us and through us out into the world. It's good to follow the plans, the good guidelines we are given from God, but we can never get so attached to our own plans, our own ideas about what God wants for us, what we think is best for the world around, that we shut our ears and stop listening to the

voices of those in need, we shut our mouths and stop speaking words of justice and truth to those in power. All our plans exist for a purpose, and that is to glorify God and tell the story of Jesus Christ in all that we say and do, and that means that even when we're following all the plans we make, we need to keep our hearts open to loving the people around us, we need to keep our minds open to consider that God might be calling us to do something new, to offer healing and welcome and help to someone who we didn't think was part of the plan. And I know that's hard. It's hard not to let all the trouble and the pain and the weariness we're all feeling close our hearts to the trouble that others are feeling. And yet we don't have to do this alone. Jesus Christ is the one who opened the kingdom of heaven for us. Jesus is the one who gave his own life so that we can live, who poured out his healing power on this world, on all of us, even when it wasn't convenient, when it wasn't part of the plan, even when it cost him everything. And Jesus still comes to us, to his beloved people, and still heals and restores, Jesus still opens closed mouths so they can speak, closed ears so they can hear, closed hearts and minds so we can love the world the way we have been loved. Jesus Christ still speaks to his church and tells us to Be Opened, open our hearts to the new work that he is going to do among us. Today, as we live and work in this troubled world, may we encounter the healing power of God in our lives and share it with the world, so that the world may be blessed in us and through us, because of Jesus Christ. Amen.