

Mark 7:24-37

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, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. 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." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone. 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. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

Robert Frost gives us a poem about walls – “Mending Wall” is the title and it expresses well our ambivalence about walls and boundaries. The poem begins, “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall. That sends a frozen ground swell under it.” The poem describes the spring ritual he and his neighbor perform – they walk the boundary between their two properties and replace the stones in

the wall that hunters or animals or the rigors of winter have displaced. Frost as the narrator wonders at the need for fences – “*Before I built a wall I'd ask to know/ What I was walling in or walling out/ And to whom I was like to give offense.*” But in the end he reluctantly agrees with his unimaginative neighbor, who doggedly repeats the saying of his own father – “Good fences make good neighbors.”

Do good fences make good neighbors? Today’s Gospel lesson comes directly on the heels of the one from last week – last week, Jesus responded to the Pharisees who criticized the disciples for eating with defiled hands saying that the Pharisees honored their own traditions of ritual purity over God’s commandment to love and care for others. This week, Jesus has the opportunity to make his own decision on precisely that point. A woman, in fact a Gentile woman, well beyond the social boundaries of the day for Jesus to be talking with, comes to him to ask for him to cast a demon out of her daughter.

This story causes a bit of a scandal in biblical scholarship. Jesus’ reply is seemingly un-Christlike – “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.” We don’t know whether this comment was as insulting in its original context as it seems today, but it is certainly a dismissal. But the woman persists, with some style – “even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.” Whether Jesus was testing her or whether she actually changed his mind, we don’t know, and scholars can probably debate the topic for another two millennia without making much more progress.

What’s less obvious but equally important is that both she and Jesus had to cross some boundaries to get to this point. She is a woman, a Gentile, a Syrian, who, without any male introduction, comes to speak with Jesus, who came here to Tyre apparently to be left alone. She has crossed several walls to come to ask for his help. But Jesus, too, had to cross some walls to get to this place. He has

left the synagogue in Capernaum and travelled some distance to the northwest, leaving Judea behind and entering an area of pagan non-believers. Why would he go there? What did he expect to find? Clearly Jesus crossed some boundaries to get to where the place where he meets this pushy, pagan woman.

There is another wall, another boundary that I want to call your attention to – the gulf within the young girl between herself and her demon. This is not a traditional boundary, exactly, the way we usually think of boundaries. We think of things like race and class and religion that separate people from each other, rather than things that separate us from ourselves. The only reason I noticed it was that I was reading a book by Matthew Sanford – the title of the book is “Waking” and I’m going to recommend it to the Book Club. The book is Matthew’s memoir of coming to grips with his paralysis from the chest down. This paralysis was bought on by a car accident when he was thirteen, an accident that took his father’s and sister’s lives and shattered his spine and cut his spinal cord. If you’re looking for an inspiring tale of a young man conquering his disability through force of will, this isn’t it – in fact, in his view the effort to “conquer his disability” was a necessary but nonetheless mistaken dead end in his recovery.

What does he mean, “necessary but mistaken”? Matt Sanford talks about “healing stories” and the one embodied in current medical practice is one we owe all the way back to Greek philosophy. This healing story separates “mind” from “body” and calls for our minds to master and if necessary overcome our bodies. Our minds are good and noble, the seat of our souls and our virtues. Our bodies are base and treacherous, prone to sin, evil and malfunction. This is our philosophical legacy, the idea that our minds are good and our bodies are bad. And so Matthew spent a dozen years literally fighting against his body, mastering it, overcoming it, despising it, and implicitly leaving it for dead.

Now, there may be times that we need to convince our bodies to do things that our bodies don't apparently want to do – chores, homework, exercise and the like. But what Matthew learned from his experience is that every time we behave as if we consist of separate parts, a mind separate from a body, there is a cost. The cost may simply be a lack of unity, a lack of completeness, a lack of the enjoyment and the fulfillment of a complete human experience, the failure to experience an embodied mind or a mindful body. But it can be worse – we store up a kind of debt of neglect, a debt that eventually comes due.

Matthew tells us that in his early rehabilitation, his mind needed to leave his body – the pain of his injury and the pain of his surgery and rehabilitation were simply too much. But this same separation between body and mind was what held back his later healing. And so, he began to see a second healing story, one in which he came to embrace the body he had. He learned through yoga that he had not lost all awareness of his body, but rather that his awareness had become more subtle, quieter and more delicate. Even so, this awareness guided a kind of a reconciliation between his own body and his mind, a reunion, if you will, that allowed him to become a more complete, differently-abled person today. No, he has not regained the use of his legs, and without some miracle he will remain paralyzed. But for him, the wall that separated him from his body was a mixed blessing, and in the long run, had to be removed for true healing to occur. He needed to relearn, or learn anew how to communicate with his body, to regain its memories and its gifts.

Now, I'm sure that many of you know more about yoga and holistic healing than I do, but I found Matthew's story to be a hopeful one. We have long known that the walls that divide people from each other often are negative and destructive. I'm wondering whether the same might be said of the walls that divide us from ourselves.

Many of us suffer from illnesses and injuries that divide us from ourselves. Others suffer with aging that makes us distrust and resent how our bodies have betrayed us. Cancer, chronic illness, back problems, arthritis, auto-immune disorders, addictions, mental illnesses all lead us to feel betrayed by our bodies. Sometimes this sense of betrayal motivates us to work hard to overcome obstacles. But sometimes, this sense of betrayal divides us against ourselves in unhealthy ways. When our mind and body are divided, maybe that's what demons are about. But when minds and bodies are united and we pay attention to how they work together, we can gain so much.

Walls. The Gospel story today is about a woman and Jesus, both of whom refused to let the walls between people stand in the way of healing for her daughter. But it's also about a wall that divided her daughter from herself, a wall that Jesus could, and did, remove.

Amen.