

In order to fully understand today's Gospel lessons, we need a little crash course in some ancient history of Jesus' time.

In the first story, we hear of a Gentile woman who comes to Jesus in desperate need of healing for her daughter. Her daughter, she says, has been possessed by an unclean spirit that has made her unwell. In the ancient, Greco-Roman world, and specifically in this largely Jewish culture in which Jesus lived and ministered, oftentimes illnesses were attributed to unclean spirits or demons possessing people, rather than simply germs spreading or disease just happening, like we understand illness now. It was easier for people to categorize all that was unseen into this one larger narrative of spiritual figures, whether good or bad, healthy or ill, godly or demonic, etc. Sometimes too, illnesses were blamed on the parents of a sick child, thinking that the parents' behaviors or lack of faith were the cause of illnesses or problems with the kids. While there is certainly truth to parents' influence on kids, both good and bad, the depth to which the ancient people believed this is not what we know now.

So already, as this woman approaches Jesus, begging for him to save her daughter, there are a couple of "strikes" against her. She is a Gentile, and her daughter is ill. She is from a different group of people, and there may be tones of blaming her for her daughter's illness. Gentiles and Jewish folks did not get along in this time period, which is what leads Jesus to refer to her as a "dog". This was a common, derogatory way of referring to Gentiles by Jewish folks that Jesus, being of Jewish origin, leaned heavily into as this woman came to him for healing. But this woman is smart, and challenges the derogatory reference with both heart and wit. When Jesus meets her begging for healing with an offensive aside, she puts it back to him and reminds him that even dogs receive food from the table and need that nourishing. She acknowledges the tension between the two groups but appeals to their common humanity and shared needs, regardless of background or origin.

And Jesus, upon hearing her appeal to humanity and deep need for healing, checks himself, and realizes that these needs, this common

humanity, are more important than the societally constructed tension that separated them at the beginning of the interaction. Here was a woman, a mother, desperate for her daughter's healing. And Jesus did as she asked. Jesus heard her and said that because of her words, the way she truly believed he could bring healing, she would go and find her daughter healed. And so she did. Jesus' healing and the words we use with one another truly transcend any human construction that might threaten to keep us apart.

There is a greater power to the divine things, the healing and works of God in Jesus Christ than anything we may think up in our world, including prejudice and the derogatory stereotypes that threaten to keep us apart and keep us from truly seeing and knowing our sisters and brothers and siblings. God has created and deeply loves every single person God has made, and we too are called to love all our fellow humans. Sometimes we fall prey to the unclean and demonic spirits of prejudice and judgment towards one another - even Jesus made a derogatory comment to a woman of a different cultural group than his own. But we must not dwell in that space of prejudice and judgment. We must move towards the healing power of love, common humanity, and understanding one another, which truly happens through the power of Jesus. It is what we are called to do above all else - love God, our common creator and sustainer who delights in all humanity, and love one another, our fellow siblings in Christ and dearly beloved children of God.

As we learned in the first story in our Gospel lesson today too, the words we use towards one another and the words of Jesus deeply matter in our lives. Words have the power to heal and to harm, and it is crucially important that we know the difference.

The second act of today's story has to do with a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment. It is likely this man had a particularly challenging life in the world in which Jesus lived, just as many folks with disabilities have challenges living in our very able-bodied centered world now. But on top of the challenges of being disabled in an often less than friendly world,

in the ancient Greco-Roman culture, again, people often thought illness was caused by some sort of sin of the family or unclean spirit within the person. So he is dealing with challenges both in his physical day to day as well as in an emotional, mental, spiritual, cultural way too.

Jesus meets this man with a degree of privacy, and instead of broadcasting his healing power to all, uses the humble and human and heavenly power of God to bring plain speech and hearing to this man. Jesus relies on God's power to open the ears and release the tongue of this man.

It's important to note, though, that this man did not seek out Jesus for change in his body and being, and what Jesus did for this man is not called healing like so many other actions are. The words we use and the words of scripture matter.

The words of this scripture passage say the people around town brought this man to Jesus and begged Jesus to lay hands on the man. The man doesn't do the seeking himself, it's the people around him that feel his body and way of being in the world need to be changed by the power of Jesus. It's the people around them that proclaim the actions of Jesus, we don't ever actually learn how the man feels about these actions. Did he want his body to be changed, or was it just the desire of the people around him? Was this the projection of what people thought made life easier or better for themselves and they believed would also be best for this man? What did the man think? Of course life can be easier with hearing and speaking plainly, but did this man need these things? He didn't beg like the woman did for her daughter. He didn't beg like the people in the community did for his body to be changed. Maybe he did want this change and the people rightly spoke for him. But we cannot assume that our views of what healing is is the same for someone else. The words we and scripture use and don't use matter.

When we come to the end of these stories, it's fascinating, not simply because Jesus insists that the people around him, the witnesses to the healing, keep quiet - Jesus insists this in a number of other situations too.

But it's the reaction of the people, the witnesses, who proclaim that Jesus does everything well. Of course they're astounded by the man who is now able to hear and speak plainly after being deaf and having a speech impediment. But it's that Jesus does everything well. This "everything" includes his grace for the Gentile woman, not continuing his prejudice but instead correcting himself and indeed healing her daughter and casting out the unclean spirits like he has for so many earlier in the Gospels and even here and now. This "everything" includes changing his initial course of action and instead meeting people in love and with a spirit of healing, not judgment. This "everything" includes not broadcasting the changes in the man's body because we don't know what his reaction or desires were, and respecting his autonomy in what story he does and doesn't want told, matters. The "everything" includes the human parts of himself that are perhaps not always perfect but the love God gives him is indeed perfect, and that love which is steadfast and true is what absolutely heals.

Perfect love casts out fear, and perfect love is given to us by God, who gave his only son for us on the cross and raised to new life again. Perfect love heals us and always has, in Jesus, his actions and ministries and healings, and indeed heals us now, with new life and hope for the journey to come. Even in the midst of our own imperfections, God meets us with this perfect love, which casts out even our deepest fears with the light, hope, and love of Christ. Jesus is the one who brings healing and casts out demons and gives every one of us, no matter our background or how we've been judged or unfairly cast judgment on others, no matter any human construct that threatens us. Jesus heals us and Jesus loves us, just as the created beings we are, and this is the life-saving truth in every time and place. Thanks be to God, Amen.