

Our gospel reading today presents the two extremes of WORDS and ACTIONS, through two back-to-back encounters Jesus has with two people in need.

The first encounter involves words but little action.

We meet a woman of Syrophenician origin whose little daughter is sick, and hearing that Jesus may be able to heal her, she comes and bows down at Jesus' feet.

This Syrophenician mother is not accustomed to being heard. She is a Gentile, an outsider to the Israelites who follow Jesus, and she's a woman, a second-class status in a male-dominated culture. So, in first-century Palestine, her words, her voice, her cries don't matter much. People generally don't *hear* her.

In fact, not even our gospel text hears her cries. Mark simply records the fact that she begged Jesus to cast the demon out of her daughter. And Jesus is the opposite of this woman in almost every way: he's a Jewish man and a religious leader, exactly the kind of person whose words have value; even Mark's text gives him the first word in their exchange.

And what uncomfortable words they are: "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

Jesus is a privileged person, and the woman is not; and with just a few WORDS, Jesus captures this divisive, distressing dynamic.

The words are important here, so much so that the text altogether ignores the action. We hear these words, we feel their painful impact, but what we don't see is any accompanying action. Does Jesus come closer or back away when he says this? Does he look lamentingly into the distance or is there a knowing twinkle in his eye? *We're missing most of the action.* Is he raising his eyebrows looking around to see if his disciples—if we—are listening?

Hopefully we are listening, because in this exchange, words matter more than actions. With the one significant exception of seeking him out, in the text this woman remains in her subaltern position, where neither her deeds nor her words receive acknowledgement. *Up to a point.* Because now, she engages Jesus in conversation, and we have her words recorded: “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.”

As uncomfortable as we may find this conversation, their exchange of words ends with healing. “For *saying that*,” Jesus says, “you may go—the demon has left your daughter.”

Not because of the piety of her body's posture; not due to the vehemence of her plea, nor the quality of her action, but “*for saying that*,” the demon leaves. Jesus' words ALONE heal this woman's child.

Jesus' healing of the Syrophenician woman's daughter falls squarely within Jesus' preferred method for healing. Frequently when Jesus heals someone, it's using words. In conversation. Through a verbal exchange. He says, “Be

healed." He tells people, "Take up your mat, and walk." He asks, "Do you want to be made well?"

In sum, Jesus' words matter. Even with no accompanying action; even when his actions are hidden from Scripture's sight, Jesus' words alone heal people.

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The second encounter in our gospel reading flips this script. In this exchange, we see numerous actions and hear only one word.

We meet a deaf man who has an impediment in his speech. He is, like the woman, used to not being heard; and he also cannot hear. Double outsider, again. Without the ability to hear, the man, of course, cannot hear Jesus preaching; he cannot hear the good news that is causing the crowd to draw near.

Jesus, of course, knows this. An exchange of words, like the one that worked for the woman, will not work for this man. So Jesus uses a physical technique, an active method, a sort of sign language. He takes the man aside in private, puts his fingers into his ears, spits and touches his tongue. He looks up to heaven, and signs. Six visible actions before the one word, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened," which Jesus speaks.

Until the final one word, the whole exchange is all body language. The interaction requires no dialogue at all. It's a healing with blood, sweat, and tears, or, more properly, earwax and spit.

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In one, there are words but no action. In the other, there no words but lots of actions. Placed side-by-side, these two stories invert the primacy of words and action. In doing so, their narrative structure relays the experience of the people whom Jesus heals: First, the woman who is ignored by her culture gets "ignored" by the text until Jesus engages her in dialogue. Second, the deaf man who cannot hear and cannot speak is framed entirely without dialogue until six actions and one word pierce his deafness.

The literary contrast highlights Jesus and his methods for healing. Between the two encounters, Jesus changes his approach because he knows that these people need different things.

Our evangelist, the gospel writer Mark, also understands that. He writes these two stories in different ways to show and tell how Jesus can and does interact with many kinds of people and experiences.

As followers of Jesus, we too encounter many kinds of people and their variety of experiences. In our daily lives, we encounter people in all kinds of situations, with various social standings, with a range of physical or other capacities.

And each person needs a personalized approach to hear the gospel. Each person needs a different way to hear the good news that God loves them, regardless of what they do or what they've done, or what they can't do, or what position they hold in life. What works for delivering the gospel to one person won't work for another. Jesus, and the evangelist, understand that.

On God's Work Our Hands Sunday, Jesus' example and Mark's narrative weaving speak—and act!—directly to us, reminding us that we need to approach each person with the dignity Jesus does. We too must serve people with respect for their individuality, and deliver the gospel message in the way that they will hear and understand. What works for one person won't work for another, and what works in one encounter won't work in another.

There are times when, in serving our neighbor, words simply are not enough. When we need to act. When the Salvation Army needs new bedsheets and Richmond Friends of the Homeless needs hot food and the Minnick School for children with disabilities needs new books.

There are also times when we need to keep our mouths shut and listen. When asking our neighbors what they need for healing, and for daily life. When hearing their stories of why they're hungry in the first place. When looking around for the silent and overlooked, to include them in Christ's healing, too.

And there are times when, in service to God, we need to speak up. To engage in dialogue.

To demand that others—including God—hear what we have to say. To have the courage to tell someone about Jesus. To actually say the words of forgiveness and healing and love directly to them.

WORDS and ACTIONS are our two extremes today, and God's Work Our Hands Sunday is always some blend of the two.

Which is why, at the end of worship today, we leave you with an individual choice of how to serve, because each of us delivers the message best in a personal way.

We've put on the back walls hands labeled with ACTS of service, acts that we KNOW people need (because we asked).

There are also hands for sharing God's love in words—by sending a card or approaching a neighbor.

And there are some blank hands which you can take and write upon your own act done or words exchanged in service to God.

Because each person, entity, organization needs a personalized approach to hear the gospel. What works for one doesn't work for another. So thanks be to God that we have a savior who understands that and empowers us to serve personally.

AMEN.