For some unknown reason, this woman winds Jesus up: he is harsh and teachy with her, but in the end and without even visiting the girl, he casts out the demon.

This done, Jesus leaves his holiday hideout where he had gamely tried to lay low, and heads back to Galilee. The locals apparently knew he was coming, for “They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech” and begged Jesus to heal him (v. 32). Jesus “sighed” (v. 34) and looked upwards to the heavens. He touched the man’s ears and tongue, said, “Be opened,” and the nameless man was “immediately” healed (v. 35).

Jesus pleaded, even “ordered,” the crowds to keep quiet about all of this. But “the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it…saying ‘He has done everything well’” (vv. 36-37). Jesus could not get away from his reputation for doing “everything well.” Wherever he went people found him and they told others about him.

“He has done everything well.” That was the word back *then*, but the news *now* is that a ton of people are repulsed by what is happening in the name of Jesus and by those who wave the Christian flag loud and proud. In fact, the authors of a new study on religion, secularism, and politics published at the end of 2020 note that the number of *nonreligious* people in the United States is rapidly rising. Their data show that even one news story about Christians doing something stupid or offensive is enough to push an “undecided” over the edge, away from the church, away from faith. *One story*!

Consequently, it is not really a surprise that according to this study, the nonreligious or “nones” now outnumber any other religious group. They are more nones than Catholics (pun intended!). There are more nones than evangelicals. The nones do not yet outnumber all religious groups combined, but if present trends continue, it is only a matter of time until there is more religious *nothing*than there is religious *something.*

Jesus is hardly to blame for this, but his followers have a bad reputation right now, and it is going to be tough to change unless we get to work. And it will take work. People of faith, people who love Jesus, must live and love by a higher standard than the one to which they are living and loving now.

When Jesus slipped away to Tyre, he hoped no one would notice. Jesus probably feels the same way today. But guess who shows up? Bad Christians! And unlike the Syrophoenician Woman, they do not bow down at his feet and beg Jesus to expel demons, which they surely *should* do. Instead, they beg Jesus to endorse their cause or movements. Some of the bad Christians showing up uninvited to meet Jesus are:

*Christian PACs and lobbyists* from the liberal left and the conservative right, more than 200 groups, each one committed to polishing Jesus’ reputation in the halls of Congress to advance their own agendas. They spend millions each year advocating on issues from bioethics and moral issues to economic and poverty concerns; in many cases, arguing positions opposed by other Christian lobbyists. You might make a case for the good work these groups do, but I wonder sometimes if their agenda is one Jesus would applaud or denounce?

*Christian hate groups* who demonstrate at funerals and would not recognize Jesus if he wore a name tag. A hate group is defined as a group that holds “beliefs or practices that attack or malign an entire class of people, typically for their immutable characteristics.” There are more than 900 hate groups currently operating in the United States, many of which are religiously driven.

*Sanctimonious Christians*. People with an aura of narcissistic self-righteousness, that is, people who used to be described as those who had a “holier-than-thou” complex. Perhaps this is the group to whom theologian Karl Rahner referred when he said that “the number one cause of atheism is *Christians***.** Those who proclaim him with their mouths and deny him with their actions is what an unbelieving world finds unbelievable.”

If you are frustrated by the behavior of Christians like this, then you can understand how Jesus felt when he went to Tyre for a little rest. He is praying for some respite and for space to breathe and regroup. But into this “time out” some needy folks, people who needed a healing touch, did appear in Tyre and Galilee. When Jesus encountered a woman with a daughter in distress and a man who was deaf and dumb, he stopped what he was doing and touched them, healed them, made them whole.

If we are going to interfere with Jesus’ vacation plans, the very least we might do is to follow the Syrophoenician Woman’s model and ask Jesus to help us expel the demons of religious nationalism, influence peddling, and sectarian, political, and racial hatred. Or we might do as the deaf man did, and ask Jesus to heal our provincial blindness, our self-righteous arrogance, and our inability to hear the cries of the needy all around us. If we could do this, the nones of the world just might reconsider and say, as did the local crowds in ancient Galilee, “S/He has done everything well.”

Jesus had a reputation as being someone who did “everything well.” This needs to be our reputation, too. To quote Cardinal Suhard (Bishop of Paris, 1940-1949), “To be a witness does not consist in engaging in propaganda nor even in stirring people up, but in being a living mystery. It means to live in such a way that one's life would not make sense if God did not exist.” Let’s be Jesus-people, who are willing to listen to a distraught mother, or a man out of work, or a teenager who has lost her way. The public might not notice. So much the better. The yeast of kindness will leaven the dough of belief, and those close enough to witness will say “everything was done well.”

Prayer: Dear Lord, I know it is my duty to spread the Word of God and show others the glory that can be found within You. Many people come to faith after seeing Christ’s loved displayed through the ministry of Christians. So today, I pray for opportunities to minister to others. Help me to spread Your love and grace effectively to those who do not know you. Lead me to encounter those who do not know Jesus. Let me be an example of Christian living. “In the same way, let my light shine before others, so that they may see my good works and give glory to you, my Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). Amen.

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**Jesus Gets a Reputation**

Sunday, September 5, 2021 Mark 7:24-37

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

The great mystery writer Agatha Christie created a host of memorable characters, none more so that the urbane, fussbudget, Belgian detective Hercule Poirot. In “Tragedy at Rhodes,” Poirot travels to the Greek island of Rhodes for a holiday because his “little grey cells” are desperately in need of some rest. But of course, this does not happen. At his villa, a death occurs involving the poisoning of a rich, glamorous, and frequently divorced woman. Poirot’s little grey cells are urgently required, and he will need to get his rest at another time.

In another story, “Peril at End House,” the dapper and mustachioed detective is on holiday at an exclusive resort on the Cornish coast, where he and his sidekick Hastings meet the beautiful young heiress Magdala Buckley. When the young lady confides that there have been numerous attempts on her life (a heavy-framed picture dropping on her head, a boulder falling off a cliff, a bullet piercing her hat) Poirot knows that there will be no rest for the weary at his Cornish retreat.

In our reading today, Jesus is tired, weary from his ministry and of the many demands placed upon him. Jesus wants to get away, “to escape notice” (v. 24). He traveled to Tyre on the coast of the “Great Sea” and “entered [the] house and did not want anyone to know he was there” (v. 24). But alas, he did *not* escape notice. His reputation as a healer preceded him. He is known as *somebody*. The word on the street is that when all else failed, when there was absolutely no hope, when salvation or deliverance seemed absolutely, unequivocally, positively *impossible,* Jesus could do the impossible.

This is precisely what happens. An unnamed Gentile woman from Syrophoenicia (the coastal region from Syria to Israel) contacts Jesus because her little girl had an “unclean spirit.” She either did not know that Jesus wanted a break from the Messiah job, or she did not care, because the Bible says that “she came and bowed down at his feet…[and] begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter” (vv. 25-26).