

Sermon for 9-9-18
Gospel: Mark 7:24-37
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Did Jesus just call that woman a dog?

"Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."ⁱ

Yes, yes he did. Jesus called a desperate mother a dog.

If that doesn't sit well with you, if it doesn't jive with the merciful, compassionate Savior you know... good! This episode, as distressing as it may be for us, is a vital moment in the dynamic evolution of Jesus's ministry in the Gospel according to St. Mark.

So what exactly is going on here?

Let's go back a bit, and recall the events of the previous chapter. The 6th chapter of Mark's Gospel begins with Jesus being dramatically rejected in his hometown synagogue. Soon afterwards, his cousin and ally John the Baptist is murdered by King Herod. Jesus tries to take some time away with his disciples, to rest and process their grief, but that's impossible due to the hordes of hungry, sick, needy people following him everywhere. So he feeds the five thousand with a miraculous meal, and heals many with just a touch or a word.

Chapter 7 begins with a rhetorical showdown between Jesus and the Pharisees -- that was our Gospel for last Sunday. The Pharisees have come to try to catch Jesus misbehaving and undermine his authority, but Jesus dismisses their hollow piety and reframes their traditional understanding of purity: "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile."ⁱⁱⁱ

All of these events, in fact, almost everything reported in Mark's Gospel up to this point, occur in locations on or near to the western coast of the Sea of

Galilee. Nazareth, Capernaum, Gennesaret -- all are Galilean towns. All under Roman control during this time period, but all with significant Jewish populations and all within the historic boundaries of the land of Israel.

The events described in today's Gospel reading represent the first time, according to Mark, that Jesus has spent more than a few hours outside of Galilee. Jesus and his disciples travel north to Tyre, a city in Syrophenicia; then further north to Sidon; and then southeast, toward a region called Decapolis, east of the Sea of Galilee and the Jordan River.

Personally, I don't think remembering all these names, or being able to visualize the map, is super important for our purposes. What is vitally important is to understand that this encounter with the Syrophenician woman comes at the very beginning of Christ's first significant journey into hostile territory. Jesus and his disciples are now traveling in areas with predominantly Gentile populations that have been military enemies of Israel for centuries.ⁱⁱⁱ These lands are foreign and uncomfortable and even dangerous for Jesus, and yet, here he is.

Let's imagine how Jesus might be feeling at the moment when the Syrophenician woman appears. He's been rejected in his hometown, he's had no opportunity to grieve his cousin's unjust death, he's fed and healed thousands, a never-ending stream of suffering humanity that follows him wherever he goes. He's won his verbal battle with the Pharisees but lost many followers in the process.

Perhaps he's exhausted. Perhaps he's achingly tired, full of sadness and frustration, desperate for a moment of relief and respite. Perhaps he is, in the familiar vernacular of today, *really stressed out*. Can we allow him that? We certainly allow ourselves to live in that place where overwork and exhaustion meet unprocessed emotion and barely disguised rage... and we know the kinds of mistakes we make, the offenses we commit when we reach the 'end of our rope' and we're just barely hanging on...

I believe **that's** where this unpleasant response comes from. Take one part complete emotional, physical, and spiritual exhaustion; combine with

generations of inherited fear and distrust of a historic enemy; add in a splash of gender politics and cultural norms; and here's the result: "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

Some interpreters don't want to acknowledge the possibility that Jesus could have ever made a mistake or spoken an unkind word, and so they argue that he made this rude analogy on purpose, to test the Syrophenician woman's faith in him. That may be true; but even if these words are an intentional test of faith for this unnamed mother, they're still harsh and insulting. She has thrown herself at Jesus's feet and begged him to heal her suffering child, and he answers with an analogy that identifies her and her daughter as dogs, less worthy of his attention **and his salvation** than his fellow Jews.

This episode brings us face to face with one of the most challenging aspects of Christian theology -- we have a Savior who is both human and divine. The Word made flesh, God Incarnate, Emmanuel -- it's easy to say, but hard to wrap our minds around. We're more comfortable with the divine Jesus, the one who heals with a touch, who delivers with a word, who feeds with miracles and raises the dead to life.

But what about the human Christ? It's hard for us to let him be human, to allow him to feel weakness and fear and exhaustion and despair, to let him make a simple mistake and utter an unkind word. But if we cannot allow him those things, then we also deny other aspects of his humanity, the ones that mean the most to us -- his suffering and death on the cross. We have a God who suffered and died, just as we all suffer and die, and who conquered suffering and death and rose again to show us that death is not the end of the story. **That** is the miraculous reality of a Savior who is fully human and fully divine!

So in this moment, with this Syrophenician mother, Jesus makes a very human mistake -- in his exhaustion and frustration and despair, he says an unkind word. But this woman, *thanks be to God*, is strong and brave and far too bold to be dissuaded by an insult, and she digs in further. She turns his analogy upside down; she pushes him to acknowledge what the way of mercy

and compassion and love demands: "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."^{iv}

Jesus immediately recognizes the wisdom of her response, and changes his response accordingly: "For saying that, you may go -- the demon has left your daughter."^v He grants her request, he heals her daughter's infirmity and restores her to wholeness.

And then, in his next encounter, with the deaf and speech-impaired man in Decapolis, it seems that Jesus has committed himself to a new way, a widening perspective on who and how God has sent him to serve. Never again will he ignore the needs of Gentiles; never again will he dismiss the pain and suffering and hunger -- the equal dignity and humanity -- of those who are not part of God's chosen people. It's the beginning of a new chapter, a new phase, a new age in the story of salvation.

When Jesus takes this Gentile man aside, this unclean man, this not-at-all chosen man; when Jesus touches his ears and his tongue, crossing every boundary of physical propriety and cleanliness and decency; when Jesus says in Aramaic, the language of the everyday people, "'**Ephphatha**,' that is, '**Be opened**,'"^{vi} he's not just performing one miracle. He's not just healing one person. He is doing those things, of course, but he is also making a declaration, a prophecy, a proclamation about God's work in the world. From now on, God's love and compassion is opened to all who may seek it. From now on, salvation is not reserved for a precious few but is opened, extended, radiating outward. From now on, the Spirit of Christ is opened, his love is pouring out, saturating and blessing the entire world with his presence.

May our hearts and minds and souls be opened to the truth of his great and gracious love, now and from now on. **Amen.**

ⁱ Mark 7:27 NRSV

ⁱⁱ 7:14-15

ⁱⁱⁱ See "Be Opened: SALT's Lectionary Commentary for Sixteenth Week after Pentecost" at <http://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2018/9/4/be-opened-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-sixteenth-week-after-pentecost>

^{iv} 7:28

^v 7:29

^{vi} 7:34