

**The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Mark 7:24-37**  
**St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Sedona Arizona**

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

Jesus of Nazareth! Who do you think you're talking to? Is that any way to speak with someone who is asking for help? And what kind of guest goes on vacation and insults the people of the host country? Really, Jesus. You may be tired and worn out from feeding the 5,000, and healing and exorcising the people of your own religious tradition, but what good does it do to make derogatory comments to someone whose faith practices are different? Haven't you heard that honey attracts more flies than vinegar? In the Name of God, what are you going to do to make things right?

The Gospel writer, Mark, doesn't actually say whether Jesus' mother is traveling to Tyre with him and the other disciples. But I imagine that her voice infiltrated Jesus' conscience as he responded to the Syrophenician woman's desperate pleading. I imagine that Jesus probably regretted what he said as soon as the words came out of his mouth. We've all been there. The words get ahead of our hearts, and then we struggle to dislodge our foot from our mouth.

But this isn't the kind of behavior we expect from Jesus. His lack of compassion seems so out of character it makes us squirm in our seats. What are we to make of this confrontational scene that for centuries has prompted some theologians to perform mental gymnastics in order to create excuses for Jesus' rudeness?

If we go back to the beginning of this scene, we recall that Jesus went to the region of Tyre for some R & R. Even though he had regularly paused for prayer and solitude away from the crowds, Jesus was tired, if not exhausted, from the pace of

his ministry. He may have gone to the seaside town in Gentile territory, to escape the pressures of ministering to the children of the lost sheep of Israel. Yet, Jesus' reputation for healing and exorcizing had spread beyond the region of Galilee. And the human need for his healing touch would not be limited by ethnic or religious boundaries.

From this Syrophenician woman's perspective, the human need was exceedingly great. It didn't matter to her that she lived outside of the law of Moses, or that she was a descendant of the ancient enemies of Israel. It didn't matter to her that she was approaching a foreign man while unaccompanied by a husband or male relative.<sup>1</sup> As a mother concerned for the health of her child, her fierce love knew no bounds. She was not about to risk her daughter's wellbeing for the sake of cultural propriety. Without hesitation she respectfully approached Jesus and pleaded for him to do what he had done for others who had been overtaken by demons.

Although we do not know how much the Syrophenician woman had heard about Jesus' ministry, it was enough for her to seek him out almost as soon as he arrived in her town. For the audience of Mark's Gospel, this was perplexing moment in Jesus' ministry. He had recently abolished traditional distinctions between Jews and Gentiles related to handwashing before meals. And he had intentionally crossed over into the "impure" territory of the Gentiles. Did he honestly expect not to interact with the local people? Did he truly think that he could control the spread of the good news?

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<sup>1</sup> Elisabeth Johnson. Working Preacher, 2018. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-23-2/commentary-on-mark-724-37-3>

Jesus' initial response to the woman revealed a tension between his insensitive remarks about timing and her urgent pleading for mercy. Jesus didn't exactly say "no" to her request. He basically said, "Not now." In other words, "calm down, stay in your place, wait your turn while I minister to the Israelites first." Jesus' reaction to her anguish seems clueless. What holy person would presume there was any benefit to delaying an exorcism, for such healing "characterized the overthrow of Satan's kingdom?"<sup>2</sup> Patience may be a virtue, but Jesus' reluctant tone was noticeably derogatory. In the ancient Mediterranean world, the term "dog" was a blatant insult. Dogs were not adorable spoiled domestic pets. They were viewed as unclean, much like we consider rats in our own culture.<sup>3</sup>

Rather than taking offense at Jesus' uncharitable epithet, the woman calmly retorts that even the dogs find ways to receive nourishment. What are a few crumbs to someone who has the power to feed multitudes from a few loaves and fishes, and create an abundance of leftovers? And besides that, what value is there in triaging spiritual healing? How can the world be redeemed when justice and mercy are delayed, if not denied? The injustices imposed on people of this woman's gender and ethnicity were deplorable. And the inequalities levied by the tyrannical ruling class were cruel. Evil was rampant and had no qualms about infiltrating every aspect of society, even small children. From this woman's perspective, she had been waiting and watching for the right moment, for the right person to heal her daughter. In her eyes, Jesus was the one who could save anyone and everyone. In her eyes, Jesus' ministry had the potential to transform the world, right here and right now. And

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<sup>2</sup> C. Clifton Black. *Working Preacher*, 2021. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revision-common-lectionary/ordinary-23-2/commentary-on-mark-724-37-5>

<sup>3</sup> Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh. *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, second ed. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press (2003), 177.

she called it like she saw it. She told the truth and the truth set her and her daughter free.

Telling the truth takes courage. It's risky and requires persistence and resilience. Truth telling is speaking hope into reality, new life into the present moment. Speaking truth to power can be scary, but for those marginalized by powerful structures and prejudicial institutions, there is nothing more dangerous than remaining silent and subservient to systems that disempower, humiliate, and oppress. The Syro-Phoenician woman mustered the courage to speak truth to power, and in doing so, she woke Jesus from the illusion that he could conveniently ration spiritual care, emotional wellbeing, and physical healing. She woke Jesus from the deception that discrimination could in any way bring about the kingdom that God desires. She woke Jesus from the misconception that the salvation he came to bring knows no ethnic, national, political, social, economic, or gendered boundaries.

God's vision of grace is more inclusive and expansive than we can imagine. And sometimes we need to be woken up by an outsider, or stranger, and even an enemy to see how God's love knows no boundaries. Like Jesus himself, we can be woken to a larger vision of ministry when we listen to and trust people whose life experiences are different than ours. For those of us with power, and privilege and agency we need to be woken to the fact that Christ's work is not linear, incremental, and gently unfolding. It is urgent, impactful, and insistent. And the invitation to become God's beloved community is not written on a beautifully embossed and properly addressed note card. An invitation to enter into being God's beloved community can be messy and unpredictable. It can be hastily scribbled with crayon on a scrap of paper. It can come in the form of a disabled veteran with a cardboard sign at an intersection. It can be a gay teenager seeing acceptance from his parents

and peers. It can be a refugee seeking a safe place to live and work.

And it can come in the form of a desperate woman showing up at an inconvenient time, and begging that she be seen and heard, and that her daughter be made whole again.

God's invitations to be beloved community can appear to come in unexpected ways and at awkward times, but in reality, the invitations are always there. Being woke is not a once in a lifetime occurrence. It is an intentional lifelong process of seeing the face of God in each other, of recognizing the kingdom of God within and around us, of acknowledging the many kinds of power and privilege we have and using those gifts on behalf of one another.

The expansiveness of God's beloved community cannot be bounded by religious creeds, limited by official doctrine, or restricted by bureaucratic laws. God's love is about incarnation and resurrection for all of God's beloved children. And God's love cannot be confined to the walls of our churches, restricted by our judgmental hearts, or desperately held onto by illusions of power and privilege. The kingdom of God breaks through all our excuses and fears to wake us up to the truth of God's love. God's love is not portioned out to those who appear to have more power and privilege than others. God's love is revealed through uncommon relationships between insiders and outsiders, slave and free, Jews and Gentiles, and people of all gender identities. Uncommon relationships that reveal the gifts that God has bestowed upon each of us for the benefit of one another.

If we are honest about it, we all have some kind of power and privilege, and we all have the ability to use it for the benefit of others. Author and Episcopal evangelist Stephanie Spellers points out that we can practice being good stewards of our privilege. In a recent virtual forum, Spellers asked, "How do we use our

privilege in ways that Jesus used his? How do we love the face and voice of God that we see in others the way that Jesus did? How do we care for one another the way that Jesus cared for everyone and let his heart be broken open . . . [Even by a Syrophenician woman?] How do we care that much? How do we surrender like Jesus? Risk like Jesus?” Instead of pretending we don’t have power, Spellers urges us to use our power in order to help dismantle systems of inequality, domination and oppression. “That’s the challenge,” she says. “That’s the invitation, especially in our wider church where there is so much privilege . . . We can surrender privilege. [We can transform it] and use it for the sake of liberation.”<sup>4</sup>

For the sake of becoming beloved community.

For the sake of *being* the beloved community that God intends for all.

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<sup>4</sup> The Reverend Dr. Canon Stephanie Spellers, *The Church Cracked Open: Disruption, Decline, and New Hope for Beloved Community* | The Forum, St. Bart’s New York City. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tJ2Nv5VixKA>