

September 9, 2018 • 16th Sunday in Kingdomtide

“Really??”

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

*Mark 7:24-37*

From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” But she answered him, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” Then he said to her, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.” So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, “He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.”

From time to time, someone tells me that they’ve decided to read the whole Bible, start to finish, something of a bucket list kind of thing to accomplish before you die. Like visiting Machu Picchu or visiting all the major league baseball parks in the US or go tandem skydiving or something.

Now my Grandmother Farris read the Bible, cover to cover, every year, but she was a Southern Baptist woman of deep faith, strong will, and, shall we say, steely determination. It would never have occurred to her to not finish what she set out to do, especially concerning the Bible. But most of us mere mortals have a quite different experience as we undertake this quest.

I usually advise against it. Because, quite frankly, we might get through Genesis, Exodus—great drama and story—but then arrive at Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy...and we’re done. Boggled down in lists and laws that leave us wondering whatever became of the living spirit of God.

So I suggest that people start with something a bit more manageable and achievable, like reading the Psalms or the Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—the stories of the life of Jesus. And who doesn’t like a good story? Well, at least until you get to one like we heard Whitney read for us this morning. Sort of like the passage Nathan unpacked so well for us last Sunday, this one, if you were listening carefully, should cause you to cringe and shout: “What? Really? Did Jesus just say what I think he said?”

You know, reading Bible stories should come with something of a warning. Like “Adult Language” or “Some Violence.” These stories are not really intended to be PG bed-time lullabies. Oh, sometimes they are, when the angels and all the stars sing together. But mostly these stories are designed to open us up to the living Word of God that is at times more provocative than peaceful, more disturbing than comforting. As the writer Maxine Hong Kingston puts it: “a story can take you through a whole process of searching, seeking, confronting, through conflicts, and then to a resolution.”

Let’s see how the great story we hear today about Jesus and the Syrophenician woman does just that. Because Mark’s Gospel is honest enough to tell us this story, we are privileged to learn something really important—about Jesus, about the Kingdom of God, and about ourselves.

Let’s set the scene. Things had been going pretty well for Jesus. Prior to this excursion, he had fed five thousand with just five loaves and two fish. He had walked on water. He had healed hundreds, thousands, maybe, at Gennesaret. But Jesus must have been pretty tired, worn out in fact, from all these fantastic moments.

He went off to the region of Tyre and Sidon and went into a house and didn’t want anyone to know he was there. Maybe he needed a break, a little down time. Time to regroup before launching forth another day.

Mark doesn’t tell us why he went there. In case you don’t remember your Holy Land geography from Sunday School, this is rather like saying that Jesus went across the tracks, or South of the Border, Tyre and Sidon being the two most prominent Grecian cities, non-Jewish or Gentile cities, a region despised by Jews, actually, where the Canaanites lived, a region considered enemy territory at the time.

Unfortunately for his intended R&R, Jesus’ reputation as a healer preceded him. There was to be no rest for the weary. A Greek woman, a mother, whose little daughter was very sick, sought him out. She was desperate, and like any mother would do, she was willing to try anything to save her child. Though not a Jew herself, she ran to Jesus, this great now-famous healer, and bowed down at his feet, prostrating herself before him, to honor him in an act of respect if not out-and-out worship. She begged him to cast out the unclean spirit and heal her child.

But listen again to how he responded. Jesus says to her: No. “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Really???? Jesus refers to her and to her child as dogs? Really? Could the same Jesus who had just recently fed the five thousand men, and all the women and the children, with plenty left over, could Jesus have said this to one desperate albeit Syrophenician woman pleading at his feet? You are dogs to me.

To add an important note here—these “dogs” under the table are not the cute, cuddly, household pets we will be blessing on the Blessing of the Animals in a few weeks. NO—dogs in that day were unclean, flea-ridden, filthy, unwelcome pests, scavenging for

food wherever they could. The practice at the time was to drive them away with rocks and sticks. This is the tone of Jesus' unthinkable insinuation: you are dogs to me.

Jesus, the once and future Messiah, has clearly gone way off script here. Tired, distracted, depleted, he doesn't measure up. He does not live up to his own standards. In fact, he fails rather miserably. He is cold, mean, almost cruel. Surely Jesus would never have looked at any other human with such condescension and scorn? Dismissing her need so harshly? Abandoning her and her little daughter to lives of pain and fear? Well, as one of my favorite theologians, Letty Russell, once said, this story is clearly a case of Jesus getting "caught with his compassion down."

What's going on here? What does this story teach us about Jesus, about the Kingdom of God, about ourselves?

Consider that the Syrophenician woman embodied many of the prejudices Jesus would have carried within himself, inherited from the society and culture in which he had been raised. She was a foreigner, with a different language and faith. She was from a group, the Canaanites, that the Hebrews looked down on. The indigenous people of the land. Superstitious. Backward. Pagan. Unclean. A political threat. Enemy.

Moreover, she was a woman, and she was a woman speaking for herself, not through the intermediary of a father or husband. She was a mother pleading for her little daughter, in a culture in which daughters were seen as an expendable commodity, a drain on family resources, and this little one possessed by a demon.

For all these reasons, Jesus would have had inculcated within him deep layers of narrow-minded prejudice and discriminatory bigotry. And speaking from that hateful script, he rejects her. He calls her a dog.

Though we are loathe to admit it, is there not lurking in all our hearts some manifestation of the same prejudice and bigotry that plagued even Jesus himself? Is this not our experience, too?

We must ask, for example, what is it that causes people to rise up and seek to keep shelters for homeless men, women and children out of their communities? What is it that continues to fuel the racism that divides us one from another?

You see, what we see when Jesus goes off in this story echoes through our own stories and our own hearts. The same prejudice which, evidently, Jesus himself felt when first confronted by the Syrophenician woman, the prejudice Jesus overcame that day, is the prejudice and racism we, too, must confront in our own hearts and overcome.

Fortunately, Mark's Gospel story continues. But not without a sea-change within Jesus himself. The woman just won't give up that easy. She dares to answer him: "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

The woman persists, all for the sake of her little daughter. She dares to challenge Jesus with his own words and hold him accountable to that which he professes, and Jesus himself is transformed. 'This desperate woman stretches his vision of God's grace, and makes clear to him in an unexpected and initially unwelcome way that there is room in God's kingdom for all, for Jew and Gentile, male and female, insider and outsider.'

Miraculously, Jesus himself experiences a conversion. And only after this internal transformation can Jesus answer the woman: "for saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." The disciples were astounded beyond measure! From that moment, her daughter was restored to health. And from that moment, Jesus himself was healed from bigotry and misplaced ethnic pride.

The Syrophenician woman causes Jesus to turn deep within and find there a reminder of the God who created him and sent him into this world to reveal the Kingdom of God for all to see. Jesus is changed by the faith he professes and the God he loves. He remembers something deep inside him, that in the Kingdom of God, no one is outside the embrace of God.

Tonight, we will open our sanctuary, as we have done for over twenty years, to welcome Rabbi Jeff Marx and the congregation of the Sharei'Am Synagogue to celebrate here their Rosh Hashana services. For our Jewish brothers and sisters, this is the celebration of the new year, a time for renewal, a time to focus on ultimate spiritual truth, a time for learning how we humans can turn towards God.

Let us hold them in our prayers, and pray that we ourselves might likewise be refreshed and renewed, catching our breath after the heat of summer, turning again towards God, remembering the great stories of faith, celebrating with hope and joy, together with all God's children and all God's creatures, sheltered in the rainbow arc of God's astonishing, life-changing covenant love.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

Notes:

Letty M. Russell. *The Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church*. Westminster John Knox Press, 1993.

Dr. Karen A. Keely. "The Crumbs Under the Table: Bread Enough for All." Sept. 3, 2006.

Dr. David Lose: "Dogs and the Kingdom of God."

David L. Ulin. "America's disrupted narrative." *LA Times*, Sept. 2, 2018.

Arthur I. Waskow. *Seasons of our Joy: A Handbook of Jewish Festivals*. New York: Summit Books, 1982.

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