

²⁴[Jesus] 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, ²⁵but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. ²⁶Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷He 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." ²⁸But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." ²⁹Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." ³⁰So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

³¹Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. ³²They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. ³³He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. ³⁴Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." ³⁵And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. ³⁶Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. ³⁷They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."

The woman had a lot of things going against her when she approached Jesus. 1) In a patriarchal society, she was a lowly woman, meaning she had no right to approach this man. 2) In a society known for its high regard for cultural purity, she was an outsider who looked different than Jesus. 3) You might know how tough it is to share that a family member has "issues," and this woman had to swallow her pride in order to admit to this male stranger that her own daughter has

issues of a demonic type. 4) And perhaps the biggest thing going against her: she was interrupting his long overdue vacation.

The gospel writer, Mark, tells us exactly what Jesus was desiring: “He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there.” I imagine he was hoping for something like a Bed & Breakfast spiritual retreat. Relax for a couple of days. Sleep in late. Spend some time by himself in quiet prayer, and not be burdened by the crowds for a little bit. So picture the respite of that, and then hear these next words from Mark. “Yet he could not escape notice...”

We are told that a woman found him, and she began to beg that he heal her daughter from a demon. All she had was some word about some cool things this Jesus guy was teaching and doing. Call it hope or call it rock bottom, but she thought, “Maybe he can help my daughter.” She knew how people would view her as a woman breaking social protocol to approach a man, as a foreigner to top it off. So at great expense to any self-esteem she had, she approached Jesus for help. And *** Jesus *** threw it in her face. He didn’t show her grace; he showed her flagrant disregard. Numerous Christians throughout the ages have made attempts to soften the words that Jesus 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.” Try as one might to shine a better light on these words, the truth is that in any culture it is at best cruel to compare a woman and her daughter to dogs. As one biblical scholar has put it, Jesus “was caught with his compassion down.”

After this exchange between Jesus and the woman, one would expect her to turn and walk away humiliated. Instead, she persisted and stayed put. She played this man’s game. She concedes to him that she is a dog, in effect saying, “Okay, then. I am a dog. A dog in a man’s world. All that I ask of you is that you let me play the role of the dog, because at least that way I can eat some crumbs from your so-called gracious meal.” If what she was told about Jesus’ teachings is true – that the reign of God is abundant and present here and now – then the table cannot hold all the food. I wish there was a word for the type of frustration that is **only** seen when a mother is at the end of her rope trying to find a better future for her kid. In that moment of maternal exasperation, she barks back at Jesus that the crumbs falling from that table have enough grace and mercy within them to suit her needs. She demands that Jesus realize it, too. I believe her words were the raw voicing of her

disgust of how this world often casts aside women. It is her disgust at how easily people think of foreigners or anyone asking for help as sub-human. I've said this before, and I believe it with all my heart: "Voicing anger at injustice is how prophets hope." The prophets of old voiced their anger when people already cast aside were being pushed down more. The best prophets also voiced their anger at God for allowing such injustice to persist. That anger isn't a sign of lack of faith in God; it is a hope-filled demand that God act. "Voicing anger at injustice is how prophets hope." This woman's moment of righteous mom rage was a prophetic voice to Jesus, because someone who was supposedly sent by God should do better.

This was the first real encounter that Jesus had with someone outside the Jewish community, according to Mark. Jesus has never had to articulate what the good news of God's reign means for Gentiles. This passage immediately follows last Sunday's passage, and the takeaway of Jesus' teaching there were that 1) our distinctions of who-is-in and who-is-out do not matter to God – what matters is our heart – and 2) behaving selfishly is the common thread of the evils that may arise from the heart. This gentile mother's response made Jesus think-through how he is right now making a distinction of who-is-in and who-is-out. Her response made him think-through how right now his desire for peace and quiet has led him to selfish behavior.

At this juncture, this story raises a whole of theological and christological questions. Mark never resolves these questions for us, so we are left wondering what all this has to say about Jesus. What we do know is this: because of this encounter with this woman, a shift takes place in Jesus' ministry. At this point in Mark's gospel, Jesus begins to proclaim God's reign and its good news for everyone: Jews and Gentiles. Jesus seems to realize that if the feast set before God's people is abundant to the point of overflowing, then there must be enough crumbs for Gentiles like her.

We can learn a few things from this story, too. First, Jesus accepts her argument. He was ungracious at first, yet her words prevailed, and he turned to show grace. If he can embody that kind of humility, then I hope that we can, too. Second, Jesus shows us by example that it is worthwhile to listen to voices that differ from our own. If Jesus can learn from encounters with people who are different from him, then so can we. Third, we can hold Jesus accountable to his proclamation. Like this mother, sometimes God's grace is brutally hidden from us in life. Rather than walk away, she

called Jesus out for failing to show some of this abundant grace that he's been talking so much about.

Mark did not share her name, but this woman is one of the greatest people in all of scripture. She was willing to wade through the ridicule this world expresses toward foreigners, she was willing to put up with this world's derisions for women who "don't know their place," all so she could get her daughter some help. When that plea for help was thrown back at her, her righteous mom rage took over. If God's grace is so abundant, then there is enough even for the dogs.

She laid herself completely bare so that she could cling alone to the naked word of God: grace. There might be times in your life that it appears that the world or even God has brutally shut you out. The question is, "What does faith look like during times like that?" Perhaps the best expression of faith is not the proper recitation of doctrines and confessions. Perhaps the best expression of faith is stubbornly clinging onto Jesus and demanding somehow that he heal, that he restore, and that he save.

Amen.