

SECOND READING: Mark 7:24-37

pg 42 NT

24 From there 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, 25 but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. 26 Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. 27 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." 28 But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." 29 Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." 30 So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone. 31 Then Jesus returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. 32 They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. 33 He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. 34 Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," (EF FA THA) that is, "Be opened." 35 And immediately the man's ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. 36 Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. 37 They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."

FIRST READING: Isaiah 35:4-7a

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4 Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you." 5 Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; 6 then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; 7 the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

“A New Perspective”

Well, today we begin again to study from the lectionary after a summer of addressing a lot of different texts. And boy, do we start off with a bang! We begin not only with the powerful words of Isaiah prophesying the time when Jesus is in his kingdom, *“the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy”*. But we also begin with Mark’s telling of the story of the Syrophenician woman & Jesus. This is a deeply theological, somewhat difficult, but beautifully important passage.

The first sentence sets the unusual stage.... *“From there Jesus set out and went away to the region of Tyre”*. Tyre is a long, long way (in a galaxy far, far away) in many respects from Jesus’ usual stomping ground. It is on the Mediterranean coast, probably a 3 day walk from the Sea of Galilee. It is a pagan, Gentile city, deep in Gentile territory. Its people’s relationship with the Jews is one of long standing animosity. Jesus was raised certainly hearing horrible things about the people of Tyre, understandably so. The prophet, Ezekiel condemned it. He said, *“See I am against you, O Tyre. I will hurl many nations against you”*.

So why did Jesus choose Tyre as a destination? We do not know, but a good guess is that he thought that because Tyre was a place where Jews would never think of going, he would have some anonymity and reclusion there. He had, you see, been preaching about some unsettling and risky things as of late, and he knew he needed to lay low. He’d been addressing the Jews’ misunderstanding about clean and unclean things. He explained that that which is unclean is what is on the inside our hearts not outside our bodies. Regardless, his desire to be anonymous was not working out so well. The news has traveled fast and he was recognized.

A woman, a Greek woman, of Syrophenician decent, seeks out his help. She begs Jesus to cast out the unclean spirit from her little daughter. This is as audacious as it is shocking...a gentile, a woman! But nevertheless, this woman bows down, giving Jesus honor, and straightforwardly exhorts him. She is obviously desperate, really desperate, in a state of anxiety that none of us have ever known. Barbara Lundblad makes the powerful point that *“this woman is not ‘past tense’”*. In our time, Rev Lundblad says, *“she is a Palestinian woman with a sick daughter stuck at an Israeli checkpoint. She is an African American inner-city mother praying*

that her son comes home safely. She is an undocumented immigrant afraid to take her daughter to the ER.”¹ She is desperate, desperate for Jesus to heed her cries.

Well, the story goes that Jesus turns her down. He says, “*Let the children be fed first.*” What this means is that he’s come not to spread the gospel to the Gentile world, but to tell the Jews that their long-awaited deliverance is at hand, and indeed he’s come as the One to bring it about. His personal vocation is to fulfill the promise made to Father Abraham centuries earlier, the promise that Israel was meant to bless all the families of the earth, but only after they themselves had been made whole. “*Let the children be fed first*” is Jesus’s way of saying that “*for the moment it is vital that I not be distracted from my primary and difficult task. I have specific things to do and a limited time to do them in*”.² (pause)

Now, brothers and sisters, let me ask you something. At some time or another, haven’t you changed your perspective on something, something that you never thought you’d budge on? Maybe there are policies or behaviors that you’ve supported for long times and felt very secure in doing so, but now you don’t have the same opinion of them. Or maybe there are other people which you now support but used to oppose. Looking back, you may see that you’ve arrived at your new perspective in a gradual manner, always rolling toward it. Then again you may have had a dramatic moment which changed you rapidly. Whatever the situation, I bet it was not easy. Change is very hard for most of us, humans.

Well, here, in this text from Mark 7, we find Jesus, fully human, fully divine, changing, embracing a new perspective, his destined perspective. We see his movement from the vantage point of the Messiah of the Jews to that of the Savior of the world. It is somewhat of a challenge for him and he at first seems to heap onto the “turn-down” with the some harsh words. “*For it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.*”

I must digress and say that these surprising words of Jesus have made this passage difficult to understand, to accept. Over the years, people have tried hard to soften the comments.³ Some say that his words were NOT real derision because the Greek word that Mark uses in quoting

¹Barbara Lundblad. Sermon: "In Her Own Words," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P3mL8gHzTTo> (accessed 9-7-18).

² N.T. Wright. Mark for Everyone. (Louisville: WJKP; 2001),95.

³Ryan Ahlgrim. Sermon: “*Even Jesus Changed His Mind*” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UwpjyawxWmY> (accessed 97-18).

Jesus' Aramaic, is "cunarios". It means little dogs (i.e. puppies), and puppies are cute. But cute or not "*it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the puppies*" seems still an insult. Others say that Jesus is being playful here. But it's a rather cruel tease if he is, and nothing actually indicates that it is a playful statement. A third interpretation is that Jesus is testing her. He is pretending to put her down so that he can provoke a statement of faith from her. Well, this is not usual behavior for Jesus, nor does he ever congratulate her on her "faith". She is faithful, obviously, but that conversation happens elsewhere with others, not here. And the final interpretation that I've heard is that Jesus, in calling her and her daughter "dogs", is simply quoting a proverb. Sort of like, "You can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink". That proverb doesn't really call the person a horse. However, the comparison to horse (or a dog or puppy) is still not a favorable thing.

Sooo...Lots of theories to explain the tone...but I think it wise to, rather than soften these out-of-character comments, do the far more appropriate thing (i.e read them as they are written and find our understanding in considering the contexts, especially the different social contexts of Galilee and Tyre).⁴ In Galilee dogs were never under the table because there were no tables in the homes. People sat on the ground and reclined on cushions to eat. Dogs were outside animals. They were scavengers that ate unclean food. Jews often, very often, referred then to the Gentiles of Tyre, the Samaritans, and probably others as dogs because they were people outside the household of Israel. These "dogs" of Tyre in particular had exploited their forefathers brutally. It was part of the Jewish vernacular. However, Tyrian society was different. Tables were common furniture in homes. Dogs were kept as pets. The dogs lived inside and ate what the people of the household ate. No Kibbles n Bits or Beneful or Science Diet. They ate what was dropped to them by the children.

Ah, so this is why the woman response. She does not cry or correct or fight, but instead she persists with what her desperation is driving her to do. She responds by accepting Jesus' comparison with dogs. It doesn't feel good surely, but it makes sense to her that he would say it. From her perspective, she makes a reasonable case for dogs! She says, "*Sir (Lord), even the*

⁴ Ryan Ahlgrim

dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." In other words: *"Although my daughter may not be part of the house of Israel, she IS part of God's household"⁵ and she too deserves to know God's compassion and love. We all deserve more than crumbs. Feed my daughter, Lord.* And of course, with this, Jesus heals the Syrophenician daughter and tells the woman, *"For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter."*

While not the focus of his personal ministry, Jesus always has known the ultimate plan of God is for the whole world, but here and now he lets a Syrophenician woman's cry for compassion, her humble persistence, focus and trust, direct his steps toward openly bringing that plan to bear. He's been gradually moving toward the change. Remember that back in Galilee, he'd defined cleanliness as pertaining to the heart (Ah, maybe like the beautiful one of the woman). Remember also that he'd fed 5000 people with 2 fish and 5 loaves of bread and had 12 baskets of bread left over (Ah, maybe to feed others like this woman and her daughter). Jesus has always known the ultimate perspective and has been rolling toward it, but he takes it on openly this day. And, in fact, from Tyre he goes to Sidon, another Gentile city, and there he heals a deaf/mute man (*"the ears of the deaf unstopped; and the tongue of the speechless shall sing for joy"*), and feeds 4000 people with 7 baskets left over (7 is a number which means all).⁶

Friends, this story was important to Mark because the early church was wrestling with the issue of Gentile inclusion. It is an important story to us as well. It speaks to all of us as we all come from different places and are wrestling with different things. 1. Maybe you're feeling like a Syrophenician woman right now, struggling with the sting of rejection, of ridicule of ostracism. If so, hear again the woman's words, *"We all deserve more than crumbs."* And know that you can claim God's promise to love you as one of God's own. Insist upon it, ask someone to insist for you, or simply be still and feel God's love surrounding you, a treasured child. 2. Maybe you're instead someone who is feeling the tug on your heart to change and adopt a new perspective on some matter or another. Brothers and sisters, as we unpack all the radical implications of the Good News of Christ, we're going to be challenged to change. No

⁵Ryan Ahlgrim.

⁶Sam Wells. Sermon ; *"Put a Lid on It."* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9jM9QY8QIs> (accessed 9-7-18).

doubt about it. Our God is in the business of change. Expect it and be ready to embrace it. 3.

And maybe you are today feeling heavily the honored position of taking the Good news of God's boundless love and compassion to others, others who need to have THEIR minds gently changed. It's what is at the core of all of our commissions... *Teach them to obey everything I have commanded you.* (Matt 28). So let's go then, friends, with the humble persistence, focus and trust toward whatever new perspective God is leading us to.

Isa 43:19 "See, I am doing a new thing," says the Lord! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.

Amen.