

Sunday Lesson – September 5, 2021

GOSPEL: Mark 7: 24-37



Context

“In last week’s gospel text, Jesus took to task the Pharisees and scribes for their ideas of “purity” and their judgment of those who did not conform to their standards of piety. Now, as if to prove his point, Jesus heads off into “impure” territory, the gentile region of Tyre.

It seems that Jesus is exhausted and seeking some “down time,” as he “entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice” (Mark 7:24). Even in this gentile region, it seems, word has spread about Jesus. He cannot escape demands for his healing power.

The woman who approaches Jesus breaks through every traditional barrier that should prevent her from doing so. She is “a Gentile, of Syro-Phoenician origin” (Mark 7:26). In other words, she is implicitly impure, one who lives outside of the land of Israel and outside of the law of Moses, a descendant of the ancient enemies of Israel. She is also a woman, unaccompanied by a husband or male relative, who initiates a conversation with a strange man — another taboo transgressed.” *(Excerpts from workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revision-common-lectionary/ordinary-23-2/commentary-on-mark-724-37-3)*

Insight

“At this point, Jesus explained His current ministry in a way that both the woman and the watching disciples could understand. At that time, His duty was to the people of Israel, not to the Gentiles (Matthew 15:24). Recklessly taking His attention from Israel, in violation of His mission, would be like a father taking food from his children in order to throw it to their pets (Matthews

15:26). The exact word Jesus used here, in Greek, was *kunarion*, meaning “small dog” or “pet dog.” This is a completely different word from the term *kuon*, used to refer to unspiritual people or to an “unclean” animal.

Jesus frequently tested people to prove their intentions, often through response questions or challenges (see John 4:16–18; and 4:50–53). His response to the Canaanite woman is similar. In testing her, Jesus declined her request and explained that she had no legitimate expectation of His help. The woman, however, lived out the principle Jesus Himself taught in the parable of the persistent widow (Luke 18:1–8). Her response proved that she understood fully what Jesus was saying, yet had enough conviction to ask anyway (Matthew 15:27). Jesus acknowledged her faith—calling it “great”—and granted her request (Matthew 15:18).” *(Excerpts from gotquestions.org/Canaanite-woman-dog.html)*

Gospel Reading

“From there Jesus set out for the vicinity of Tyre. He entered a house there where he didn’t think he would be found, but he couldn’t escape notice. He was barely inside when a woman who had a disturbed daughter heard where he was. She came and knelt at his feet, begging for help. The woman was Greek, Syro-Phoenician by birth. She asked him to cure her daughter. He said, “Stand in line and take your turn. The children get fed first. If there’s any left over, the dogs get it.” She said, “Of course, Master. But don’t dogs under the table get scraps dropped by the children?” Jesus was impressed. “You’re right! On your way! Your daughter is no longer disturbed. The demonic affliction is gone.” She went home and found her daughter relaxed on the bed, the torment gone for good. Then he left the region of Tyre, went through Sidon back to Galilee Lake and over to the district of the Ten Towns. Some people brought a man who could neither hear nor speak and asked Jesus to lay a healing hand on him. He took the man off by

himself, put his fingers in the man's ears and some spit on the man's tongue. Then Jesus looked up in prayer, groaned mightily, and commanded, "*Ephphatha!*—Open up!" And it happened. The man's hearing was clear and his speech plain—just like that. Jesus urged them to keep it quiet, but they talked it up all the more, beside themselves with excitement. "He's done it all and done it well. He gives hearing to the deaf, speech to the speechless." *The Message*

What It Could Mean?

"The references to Tyre (verse 24), Syrophenicia (verse 26), Sidon, and the Decapolis (verse 31) are important: Jesus is traversing Gentile territory, despised by Jews (Ezekiel 26:1-28:19; Joel 3:4-8). She is a Gentile, "a Greek" (Romans 1:16; Galatians 3:28). Unconventionally for a woman in antiquity, she approaches Jesus for her daughter's exorcism. In 7:14-23 Jesus' teaching has abolished traditional distinctions between clean (Jews) and unclean (Gentiles). Therefore, Jesus' reply to this mother is disturbing. While not ignoring her (see also Matthew 15:23), he suggests a delay in her petition's fulfillment based on ethnic priority ("let the children be fed first") and the ignobility of "taking the children's bread and pitching it to the dogs" (7:27, my translation). For one who has just spoken of defilement that emerges from within (verse 23), it is Jesus who appears ignoble.

Jesus does not flatly refuse the woman's request but does prioritize "the children" (ta tekna: presumably, Israel) as primary beneficiaries. While we reel from this affront, the Syrophenician woman executes some comedic jujitsu, twisting Jesus' maxim to deliver the retort best suiting her situation: "Sir [Kyrie], even house-dogs under the table scarf down the kids' bitty scraps" (7:28 my translation).

Her acknowledgement of Jesus' superiority, the implied acceptance of his insult, the lowering of self beneath the table, the subtle shift in Greek from one term for "children" to another

(paidia) that blends immaturity and servanthood, acceptance of crumbs: all these elements anticipate Jesus' own definitions of discipleship (9:33-37; 10:13-16), congruent with the Son of Man's self-condescension (8:31; 10:41-45). That is what makes "this word" so apt and so convincing (7:29). Jesus more than concedes the quick-witted moxie of a female foreigner. He ratifies her claim to the gospel on the very grounds that he himself will explain in 10:28-31. She is not disappointed (7:30).

In the context of Mark 7:1-23, this Sunday's lection proves that Jesus' offensiveness is a fact we must face. The deeper question is whether we can follow a Christ so repulsive as to die by crucifixion (15:22-41). Jesus flummoxes everyone who boxes him into conventional expectations: the pious (2:1-3:6; 7:1-23), his family (3:19b-21), his disciples (8:33), and even some petitioners (7:24-30). If we, too, are not gobsmacked, it's a safe bet that we have domesticated Jesus and have neutered the gospel." (*Excerpts from workingpreacher.org; Revised Common Lectionary by C. Clifton Black*)

Readings for Further Study

- [Matthew 15: 21-28](#) *Matthew version*
- [John 4: 16-18/4: 50-53](#) *Jesus tested people to prove intentions*
- [Luke 18: 1-8](#) *Parable of persistent widow*

Thought for the Day

"Perseverance in prayer is not overcoming God's reluctance but rather laying hold of God's willingness. Our sovereign God has purposed to sometimes require persevering prayer as the means to accomplish His will." ~ *William Thrasher*

A Prayer

Gracious God, throughout the ages you transform sickness into health and death into life. Open us to the power of your presence, and make us a people ready to proclaim your promises to the whole world, through Jesus Christ, our healer and Lord. **Amen.**