



First United Church of Oak Park

WWJD

Mark 7:24-30

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Wait a minute! Did I read that right? Did we hear that right? Did Jesus just call a woman a dog? Did Jesus just liken someone, whose ethnicity is different from his own, to an animal that Jews considered to be unclean? Our Jesus? The good guy? Did he really just call the Syro-Phoenician woman a dog?

We would not have to go very far to find commentators and preachers who try to explain this away, who try to erase the rudeness on the lips of Jesus. Jesus is testing the woman, some of them say. Jesus is just joking around, others suggest, as if joking would somehow make this okay. Still others argue that this is Mark putting into Jesus' mouth words that he never would have uttered.

I disagree.

We can't get around the fact that Jesus calls this woman a dog and suggests that her sick daughter is not worthy of the mercy and healing he can offer. Why would he say that? We don't really know. There are lots of possible explanations suggested by the facts that Jesus is in Tyre, and the woman is Syro-Phoenician; maybe Jesus brushes them off because the woman and her daughter have a different skin color from his, or they speak a different language, or they come from the wrong part of the world, or they practice a different religion. Or maybe Jesus is just so darned tired that he cannot think straight. Whatever the reason, there is no way we can excuse his language or minimize his rudeness. Jesus calls this woman a dog, and he sends her away without even trying to help her.

This story comes just about in the middle of the gospel of Mark, which is a tightly told, carefully crafted narrative. Here, right in the middle, the gospel writer makes a couple of shifts that are going to affect the rest of the story. One of the biggest shifts comes here in chapter 7, where Jesus expands his ministry from being focused only on Jewish people, and begins to include non-Jews, Gentiles, in his mission and ministry.

Up until now, in the first 6 chapters, Jesus' whole ministry has been within the bounds of Judaism and he has pushed those bounds. He heals people on the Sabbath. He gets into wrangles with the scribes and the Pharisees. He eats with tax collectors and sinners. In all of that action, Jesus stays within Judaism's boundaries but he pushes them out, makes them bigger.

All of that culminates in this chapter, in which Jesus doesn't just push the boundaries of his faith tradition: he breaks them wide open. In the story preceding this one, he basically annihilates the Jewish food laws and declares all foods to be clean. This is revolutionary. And, shortly after this he has another miraculous feeding, this time of 4000 people, all of them Gentiles.

Here, in our text this morning, we have an in-between story. Despite all his boundary pushing, and despite breaking the food laws wide open, Jesus himself, in this text, hasn't yet made the complete shift from a Jews-only ministry to a more inclusive one. He still has some growing and learning to do before he can become all that God wants him to be. Here we see him right in the midst of the struggle. At first, he doesn't come across very well. He pushes the woman away. He tells her she's not good enough for him.

Well, she is having none of that. She is not just asking for a little respect. She demands it. There is an interesting interchange.

For starters, this interchange is not all one-sided. It is full of what 21st century scholars would call “intersectionality.” Jesus does not necessarily have the upper hand in the conversation. Power shifts around as this story is told and both Jesus and the woman have a share of it. Yes, he is the male in a patriarchal culture, and he is the one with the power to heal; he is Jesus, after all. But he’s also on foreign soil in a region where Jews are considered to be the under-class. It’s the woman who speaks the native language, the woman who is probably the wealthier and more privileged of the two, the woman who’s on her home turf. And she lets Jesus have it with both barrels. She refuses to take his “no” for an answer.¹

Usually it’s Jesus in that position, right? In almost every other story Mark tells it’s Jesus who is doing the “yes” saying, pushing against all the “no’s” and “but’s” that everybody else is voicing, confronting all their negativity.

The roles are reversed in this story. Jesus is the nay-sayer, and it’s the woman who says “yes.” And she does so by engaging Jesus in the same sort of word play that he uses with the lawyers and the scribes and the Pharisees and anybody else who gets in God’s way. And it turns out that she’s as good at that as he is. Better even. She bests him.

Let the children first be fed, for it is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.
Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.

Do you hear how she twists his words and flings them back at him? She reminds him that all God’s critters got a place in the choir. She insists that all of God’s children are worthy of God’s mercy. And Jesus gets it.

I selected this text as my preaching focus for today a few months ago, without any knowledge that this sermon would occur during the first few weeks of the airing of the documentary *America to Me*. As most, if not all of you know, *America to Me* is a documentary series that explores the aspirations of inclusiveness and integration in Oak Park and contrasts them with the realities of exclusivity that are evidenced in the harsh, indisputable facts that in our high school, different racial groups have different educational outcomes. Despite our goals and best intentions, despite our genuine hopes, Black and African American students as a group have lower educational outcomes than do students from other racial or ethnic groups in our context. This documentary will explore that by following several students through a school year.

Our high school is not an anomaly. It is one of many institutions in our community and region in which there is a gap between its stated goals and aspirations on the one hand and its concrete achievements on the other. I would not be surprised if other schools have similar struggles.

I know our congregation has similar struggles. We want to be a more diverse congregation. Our hopes and aspirations are different from our concrete reality.

¹ I read several articles about this text in preparation for preaching this week. Among the most helpful was an article by David Rhoads (Jesus and the Syrophenician Woman in Mark: A Narrative-Critical Study, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* LXII/2: 343-375).

It is likewise true of our community, Oak Park. We are surrounded by communities that remind us daily of Chicago's patterns of segregated housing, segregated economics, segregated educational systems. We are so segregated that we fall into the category of being hyper-segregated.² For over 50 years, in these few square miles, the people of Oak Park have tried to combat that pattern and we've had some success. Nonetheless, we continue to wrestle with issues of fair and affordable housing, because we're not there yet.

Some of the ugliest things about racism - and the list is long - are the ways it is able to reproduce itself in new systems, the ways it is able to camouflage itself in good efforts and admirable intentions, the ways in which it can flourish even among people who are hostile to its presence, the inventiveness with which it reproduces itself in every new generation. Racism infects everything we do in the United States. We will come face to face with those realities as we view and discuss this documentary, as many of you are doing this fall, and as we will be doing as a congregation later in the year.

I consider it a gift of the Holy Spirit that we engage Mark 7 today, because this text offers us two role models for tough and honest conversations. Both characters in our text come from complicated social locations and they are multi-dimensional. Both bring elements of power and possibility to the conversation.

Jesus is the first role model in this conversation. I know he starts out on the wrong foot by calling the woman and her daughter "dogs." But here's the thing: Even though he stumbles, when he gets called on his rudeness and his inappropriate language, he appears to get over it. He does not double down. He does not get defensive. Instead, he listens to the woman, he really listens. He does not complicate the situation with his own shame and guilt, legitimate though they may be. He stays engaged, and he does an about face. He concedes the woman's point and begins to use his power appropriately. He changes not only his mind but also his behavior. Jesus is a role model here for humility, listening, and change.

The Syro-Phoenician woman, too, is a role model for her feistiness, theological insight, and resilience. In her advocacy for her daughter and in her willingness to go toe-to-toe with Jesus, the woman embodies the gospel. She is the one who bears the truth of God in this story. She is the messenger of grace, reminding Jesus that God's love is bigger than even he can imagine. She becomes the boundary pusher, the boundary breaker in this story, and she does so on behalf of divine truth and human dignity and human wholeness.

One more thing. The woman does not give up on Jesus when he acts like a jerk and she's a role model in that way, too. She stays in the conversation long enough to give Jesus space to change. True, Jesus comes around in the twinkling of an eye, much more quickly than the rest of us do, so the woman doesn't have to do a lot of heavy lifting in this conversation. But neither does she blow him off.

These two people, Jesus and the Syro-Phoenician woman, give each other the space to be and become whom God calls them to be. And God uses them both to do the gospel's work.

We have a lot of gospel work to do at our high school, in our community, in our church, and in our world. The demon of racism has its hold on people in our communities in ways that distort and destroy. We have work to do to exorcise that demon. May God grant us grace in our conversations. May God give us insight and courage. May God guide our use of power so that it works on behalf of people and not against them. Together may we

² Massey, Douglas S. and Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

be able to move the needle a little closer to the promise of the kingdom, in the name of Christ and in the God-infused spirit of the Syro-Phoenician woman. Amen.