

Sermon Sept. 5, 2021

This week's gospel from Mark reads a bit like Jesus' diary. He goes to Tyre, goes to a house, meets a mother of a sick child, has a conversation, heals the child. After this he travels to the region of Decapolis, and heals a deaf man. If Social media had been a thing in Jesus' time, this might have taken a handful of posts on Twitter. Of course, the Bible isn't social media and there is a lot more going on than simply "what Jesus did on his day off."

The first part of this story reveals Jesus entering a house, hoping no one would notice him. But someone does, a Syrophenician woman, a Gentile. We're not told her name, so it would be easy to just think of her as part of the scenery. Yet, in this brief encounter, she displays a lot of character if we know where to look. She is a foreigner, a woman, and a Gentile; "triply marginalized." She should have no business speaking to Jesus, but she is desperate. Her daughter is afflicted with a demon. She needs help. How does she even find Jesus? How does she know he's in the area? Mark leaves that part of the story out, but never underestimate someone seeking help for a loved one.

The woman begs Jesus to heal her daughter. Jesus answers with a puzzling line. "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Was Jesus in a bad mood? He wanted to be alone and now someone was asking him for something. This portrayal of Jesus as less than kind doesn't exactly match my Sunday School upbringing. I have this vision in my head of smiling Jesus, his face serene as he's surrounded by kids and animals. However, Jesus was fully human and so, it's not a far leap to assume that he had bad days. He once cursed a fig tree because he was hungry. Still, it's taken me a while to get used to "moody Jesus."

She's asking for help and he's essentially just brushing her off. Despite the woman's social discomforts, she comes back with a statement that makes Jesus rethink his answer. "Even the dogs

under the table eat the children's crumbs." She is not taking 'no' for an answer. I imagine that took a lot of courage. Maybe she thought, I've come this far, might as well keep going.

Who are the children and who are the dogs. Scholars and theologians have equated the children to Israel and the dogs as the foreigners, the Gentiles. They theorize that Jesus' first priority was the Jews, his own people. The Syrophenician woman's statement reminds him that there is enough to go around, that his ministry can be expanded. Of course, in that moment, with a sick child, she's probably not trying to get Jesus to start a food bank or take up donations for a homeless shelter. She just wants her daughter to be well again.

In reading the Syrophenician woman's story, I can hear echoes of her desperation in the stories of parents sending their children to school in the midst of the COVID pandemic. Or in the stories of healthcare workers, having to deal with the Delta wave. Her desperation resonates in the stories and images of Afghan people trying to get out of Afghanistan. I have to admit that I see myself in both Jesus and the woman in this story. It's easy for me to become irritated when all I want is some alone time. I've also been in the position to advocate for someone I love, even when it was scary or uncomfortable.

Jesus does heal the woman's daughter. Perhaps her comeback changes his mind? Her statement has been called an example of her faith, much like that of the woman who touched Jesus' robe and was healed. The Syrophenician woman took a risk and that risk was ultimately rewarded. But she wasn't doing it for herself. Jesus even took a risk by changing his mind and healing the woman's daughter. He could have doubled down and refused her again, but he relented. Both the woman and Jesus stepped outside their comfort zones to help another.

This is, I believe what we as Christians are called to do; to step outside our own comfort zones to help someone else. As followers of Christ, we are called to put aside our own privilege, our own prejudices, to take risks for the good of others. And we can start with small gestures. Donating to our

monthly food pantry collection, taking a meal to someone who might be ill. Small gestures that can build up to larger ones. Stepping outside our comfort zone is hard, but the more we do it, the more we practice it, the easier it becomes. And God presents us with many chances to practice. What opportunities to step outside your comfort zone have you encountered lately? How have you responded? Be alert for any new opportunities God might show you to help your neighbor in new and courageous ways.