

“The Courage to Ask, Then Ask Again”
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Mark 7:24-30

Does it seem to you that our world is in greater turmoil these days? More refugees? More poverty? More mass shootings? More natural disasters? More violence? More rape? More human beings incarcerated? Are the civil rights of individuals and groups violated more often today than in the past? Are migrants treated worse? Is income more unequal today? Are the world’s religions more at odds?

Or are we just becoming more aware of these issues because of technology and better communication? Are we starting to *care* more about all of this (which I think would be a good thing)?

In any case, our religious tradition has always been concerned about social justice. Sometimes, we have made a difference, individually and collectively. We helped end slavery. We helped secure the right to vote for women and for African Americans. We are in the process of helping LGBT folks gain the right to participate more fully in society. We’ve teamed up with labor to work toward better pay and jobsite conditions, although there is certainly a lot more work to be done there.

And along the way, we’ve fed hungry people, built and improved houses, and offered friendship and many lifesaving services for the needy. We continue to do that and we make it priority in our shared life as a congregation.

Why? For many reasons. Maybe guilt. Maybe *noblesse oblige*.

But definitely one of the reasons has been because we have felt that God calls us to serve our neighbors. This is how we live out our faith. This is how we obey Jesus Christ. We help the helpless and we speak up for the voiceless. Maybe not often enough, maybe not effectively enough. But we do it because we believe it's right and it's what God wants.

As we hear in the epistle of James, faith without loving action is an empty thing, indeed.

But this morning, in our reading from the Gospel of Mark, we see a very different dynamic at play.

Jesus is confronted by a Syrophenician woman. The Syrophenicians were part of an ethnic group who lived in the Roman province of Syria, to the north of Jesus' homeland. They were Semitic, but not Jewish.

As we heard in the reading in Mark, this woman asks Jesus for help. She asks him to drive an evil demon out of her daughter. And Jesus responds with an unkind slur: *Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.*

In other words, *I am here to serve my own people, not lowlifes like you.*

Why in the world would Jesus, our Jesus, the most compassionate being the world has ever known, say something like this? Well, why would Hungary treat this woman's descendents, refugees from Syria, so terribly, as they did a couple of days ago?

Because they are human. And so was Jesus. Fully divine, yes, but also fully human, as hard as that is to accept when it comes to this kind of encounter, a moment when someone kneels down and begs him for help.

We want Jesus to be perfect. We want him to be the simple answer to all of our challenges, questions, and personal shortcomings.

But to call someone a *dog* in those days was a common putdown, and it meant *subhuman*.

So, Jesus messes up here. There is no way around it.

Yes, academics will say that this story reflects changing attitudes within Christianity in the late first century, as more and more non-Jews joined the movement. And sure, we can use the old argument that Jesus is just testing the woman, that he makes this comment with a wink and a smile. But that would be intellectually dishonest. He *is* rejecting her.

To me, this means that Jesus is not the two dimensional character we often make him out to be. Jesus is a beautifully complex being, again, both divine and human.

Remember the parable where he casts a dishonest manager as a hero? Remember when he allowed his best friend, Lazarus, to die when he clearly could have saved him?

Jesus will not fit into the carefully crafted frame of perfection that hangs on the Sunday School walls of our childhood. Jesus *changes*. And it's this complicated, evolving Jesus that will save us, not the black and white, easily understood, perfect-answer-to-every-question Jesus.

In Jesus' prejudice, we see our own. Can we also see our potential for change and growth in *his* change and growth in this story? In *his* willingness to help this woman, whom he had previously seen as a subhuman but now sees as a paragon of faithfulness, can we imagine our own ability to see *our* neighbors in a new way?

Mark's original audience would have noted Jesus' change of heart with curiosity. They would have acknowledged with admiration his ability to drive a demon out of a young girl he has never met.

But... they would have been *blown away* by the mother's willingness not only to ask for help from a Jewish rabbi, but her willingness to enter into a debate and to persevere in her request after Jesus denies her the first time around.

This kind of faith -- a faith that ignores ethnic boundaries, a faith that gives her the courage to engage in public debate with a male religious leader (in a day when that was unheard of), a faith that persists despite rejection, a faith that stands up to the accepted bigotry of her day -- this kind of faith is inspiring.

Can we let it be inspiring to *us*?

We are the prejudiced privileged, not the oppressed minority. We are the *helpers*, not those who need help. How can this woman be an inspiration to *us*? Isn't she the hero of the *underserved*? The *outsider*?

Yes, but she can be *our* hero, too.

This woman, who loves her daughter so much that she presses Jesus -- a rock star healer and exorcist with huge crowds following him at this point in the story -- this woman *is* our hero, too.

Why? Because we -- you and I and all of us -- need help and we simply don't know how to ask for it.

We are lonely and we need companionship and community. We are anxious and we need peace. We are depressed and we need to be lifted up. We are afraid and we need to be reassured. We are

hungry and we need spiritual nourishment. We are full of doubts and we need faith.

And this woman shows us what we can do about it. We can come to God, and even when we are told -- or we feel that -- God will do nothing for us, we can ask again. And again. We may not get the exact response that we want, but with God, redemption happens, comfort happens, hope happens. Even in the midst of soul crushing loss, healing happens and life opens up before us with new possibilities when we open ourselves to God's power.

I don't know what kind of demon the woman's daughter had, but it must have been pretty bad for her mom to be so audacious. And I'm glad she was, because now you and I have a hero in the Bible, a hero who shows us that we are not just the *helpers*, we are God's children in need who can ask, and with a deep and persistent faith, ask *again*, to be made whole.

Amen