

## IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Reverend Mary Newberg Gale  
Sunday, September 5, 2021

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### Mark 7:24-37

From there he 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, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. 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." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."

It has been a rough week for Jesus. Today when we stumble upon him in the seventh chapter of the gospel of Mark, he's tired, he's fed the five thousand, he's walked on water, he's healed the sick, and he just wants some rest. He is a long way from home and acting a bit unlike himself. This passage from Mark is one of the most disturbing portrayals of Jesus in our entire bible. This conversation with the Syrophenician woman becomes even more disturbing, if that's possible, when it is viewed in light of the verses that immediately proceeded.

Jesus is in an argument with the Pharisees about their ritualistic purity laws, and Jesus declared that it's not what goes into a person's mouth that defiles them but rather what comes out. To make a long story short, Jesus is arguing that what goes in eventually just comes back out. Yet the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and those are the things that we

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should worry about. Now it is quite a moving speech until just a couple of verses later Jesus turns around and gives us a prime example of how what comes out of our mouths makes us unclean. The question arises who is this woman, and what has she done to deserve to be treated so harshly. For starters, our text is clear that she was a non-Israelite, so the odds that Jesus or his disciples would have interacted with her on any ordinary terms are very, very slim. Second, she is a woman, and she's not staying in her place. She was obviously making a scene, chasing Jesus down, entering a private space of retreat, and Jesus is, as we said, exhausted, at the end of his rope, and cannot seem to catch a break from everyone who needs something. So he turns tries to shut her up saying dogs don't deserve a place at the table, but surprisingly that doesn't deter her. She doesn't even pause when she says essentially, fine. If I'm a dog, then treat me like a dog, even dogs get scraps.

What is there truly to say about this whole interchange. it is so unsettling that many people over the years have tried to make excuses for it. That it just sounds so harsh because the author of Mark is not concerned with any of Jesus's interaction with non-Jews. Maybe Jesus was tired and snappy. We all get that way sometimes. He was a long way from home, and we've been there right? Or perhaps Jesus was just testing this woman's faith knowing that he would heal her daughter. Maybe Jesus is trying to teach the disciples a lesson. Now for me each of these excuses is just a way for us to put some distance between Jesus's words and the effect. It's a way for us to contextualize what Jesus is saying, to make us feel better about it. But I can assure you that that's not the point. We can make excuses all we want, but it's very clear in this passage that Jesus is a jerk, at least right now, to this woman, and not just that, he was overtly xenophobic and sexist and we don't really know why.

We can make excuses, but it feels like our most faithful option is to sit in that ambiguity, that this is a side of Jesus our gospels don't show us often.

But the truth often is that the gospel word is not nice and comfortable, and if we're not being disturbed by it we're not listening very well.

One of the unmistakable layers of today's narrative is that of internalized prejudice. The Syrophoenician woman for a variety of reasons was considered inferior and unworthy. She was pushed to the margins in Jewish society. Her otherness is seen even in the interaction between the two healing stories. she comes to Jesus sneaking, fighting, clawing for healing for her daughter. She is dismissed and disregarded. Even after the healing, Jesus isn't kind to her. He just says fine, your daughter is healed. You may go. On the other hand, in the second half of our scriptures, the deaf man has a whole community surrounding him. They bring him to Jesus, and Jesus heals this man willingly, openly, and the community goes and tells the story of the man-born deaf. The Syrophoenician woman is unseen. The deaf man is seen.

And it's not simply her skin color or her ethnicity. It's a combination of all of those things, as well as her gender, and the cultural differences. Now in America when we talk about the word prejudice, we tend to conjure up issues of color, but it is broader than that. When the gospels and in our very lives talk about internalized prejudice, we see it in the rich and the poor,

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red and blue, north, and south, male and female, gay and straight. We see this kind of internalized prejudice and division when grown men and women spit and scream in the faces of doctors and nurses advocating to keep children safe in their schools. We see it in the means and the jokes created and shared across the internet about people fleeing for their lives from the chaos in the Kabul airport. We saw it last summer in the unrest and the indifference to the shooting of Jacob Blake and the street vigilante violence that followed in Kenosha, Washington and all of the public discussions surrounding it. We see it in the response to the Kova al Kovitt outbreak in China. We see it in Gaza, in Afghanistan, in Sudan, and Ukraine, in more places and instances than we have time to name, friends.

The reality of our existence is that the roots of human prejudice run very deep. If even Jesus struggled with it, then not a single one of us in this room are immune. The ability to fear and hate the other is inside each one of us, as is the tendency to blame them as the cause of all of the problems we see in the world. It's quite easy, simple really, to lose our compassion and our empathy, and treat people we don't know and don't want to know as inferiors, as sub-human. But what this text tells us is that if we are going to overcome our prejudice, we must struggle with it. The story of Jesus and the Syrophenician woman is meant to awaken us and inspire us to such a struggle. We gather every Sunday and confess that Jesus was sent into this world to transform it, to break the power of sin and death, and prejudice. Normally, we are very clear about Jesus's divinity, and we tend to fudge a little bit on the humanity part. This text shows us that Jesus was human. Jesus was wrong, hateful even, and had to be taught a new way. Just as Jesus stopped and examined himself, we are called to examine our hearts, to see the blindness, the intolerance, and the cruelty that others sometimes see in us.

The Syrophenician woman was a catalyst that started a new recognition for Jesus. We need that same catalyst. We have to step outside of our communities, outside of our isolated groups, and be vulnerable as Christian. We have to risk real interaction with people that we may be the least ready to interact with. Sometimes we have to risk being embarrassed, or making fools of ourselves, or saying the wrong things, or finding out that we've believed the wrong things. Wally Fletcher summed it up perfectly in lectionary homiletics. "I do not know when the next time will come that I offend someone or break someone's trust because of my unconscious prejudice. I only know that I will."

Now none of us is perfect. As fallible humans, we will inevitably do or say or think wrong hurtful things. Pretending that we won't or focusing our feelings on how guilty we feel gets us nowhere. The amazing thing about this story for me, the thing that sets Jesus apart, is that he puts his presupposition aside and heals this woman.

We are also called to set our unconscious prejudice aside, to learn from our mistakes, to try and make amends. It matters that we want to learn, that we want to change, that we want to be the people God has created us to be.

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So, friends, that leads me to ask what are the things that are making us blind to the world? Who are the people that we are unconsciously thinking of as dogs? who do we feel are criminals or animals or people who deserve the position that they're in?

Maybe most importantly, who are the people that we don't even see anymore, that our eyes glaze over them and don't even notice them?

Whose stories are we not telling?

As painful as it can be, that's what we have to ask ourselves. And once we know, once our eyes are opened, we work to make a change to be the difference in the world. Like Jesus, we value life whether white or black, male, or female, Muslim or Christian, all God's children. We are called to stand up and correct others when we see and hear hurtful things. We are the ones who are supposed to stand with our siblings who are excluded and hated and attacked for who they are. We are the ones to watch the news and teach our children why what they're seeing, and hearing is wrong, and that there is a better way that we can be together. We petition our elected officials to deal with the reality of food insecurity in our community, and we roll up our sleeves, and volunteer at the mobile food bank in the parking lot on Wednesday morning. We remind ourselves daily that we cannot judge someone, period. Not on how they look or the food that they buy or the neighborhood that they live in.

Friends, we are called to lend our voices to those people who are crying out for equality and peace and justice as we follow in Jesus' footsteps. We invite others to join us recognizing the spark of the divine in all of the children of God.

We do all of these things because of the grace that we ourselves have received. Because when we look closely in the mirror, when we look closely at ourselves, we are no more worthy of the crumbs from god's table than the people that we exclude from our own.

But through the love and the grace of God we have been counted as heirs to the covenant, beloved children who have a seat at God's table.

And it is at that table where we are given the strength to welcome all of God's children, to fight for them to have a place to join us at God's table.

May it be so this day and every day. Amen.