

## A TEACHABLE MOMENT

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September 6, 2009

Scripture: Mark 7:24-37; James 2:1-7, 14-17

A mother with a sick child is a desperate woman. She will do anything to provide for her child's health, and she is not above begging. Doctors, magicians, ayurvedic practitioners, healers- it really doesn't matter. Eastern medicine, Western medicine, voodoo and exorcism- it really doesn't matter. Only one thing matters, that her baby get better.

In the recent movie, *My Sister's Keeper*, the mother of a sick child goes so far as to give birth to a second daughter- a perfect genetic match- in order to save the first. In researching her role as the mother, the actress Cameron Diaz spoke with mothers of seriously ill children at The City of Hope, a comprehensive cancer center in southern California. In her words, "Although their circumstances might be different, whether it was economics or the dynamics of their families... the one thing that was the same for all of them was that when you have a sick child, all you do is try to save that child. There's nothing else..."<sup>1</sup>

We don't know much about the desperate mother in Mark's Gospel. She was a Gentile, not Jewish, and this seems to be the most important identifier about her, at least for the purposes of the story that Mark is telling. And we know that, like the women at City of Hope, she would do anything for her child.

Jesus was up in Gentile territory, in the coastal town of Tyre, hiding in a house on a back street, presumably in search of a little R&R. Yet Jesus' notoriety had spread beyond the communities around the Galilee, and this Gentile woman, this desperate mother, uncovered his secret hideaway. She had heard stories about Jesus, about his power to heal and raise people from the dead. She had heard the rumors that he consorted with all sorts- lepers, hemorrhaging women, paralytics. She felt reasonably assured that if Jesus would heal these social outcasts, surely he would heal a Gentile child, as well. She shows up at the guest house where Jesus is staying, her heart racing, and, without hesitation, she gets down on her knees to beg. Not unlike a dog seeking scraps from the table, I guess.

The response the woman receives is unlike anything else we hear from Jesus in the Gospels. This is, undoubtedly, one of the most problematic stories in all the Gospels, a story that makes Jesus look like... well, like an insensitive, prejudiced jerk. But there it is: Jesus -- friend to "sinners" and outsiders, who elsewhere in the Gospels seems to have no problem helping and healing those outside the boundaries of acceptability -- seems to balk at responding to a distraught Syrophenician mother's desperate request.<sup>2</sup> He refuses, at first, to help her daughter. The woman is undeterred. She gets up from her knees, wipes the dust from her robe, and discards any semblance of decorum. She flips Jesus' words around and brings him face to face with his own obstinacy and exclusiveness.

And surprisingly, astoundingly, Jesus relents. Jesus appears to change his mind, and he cures the woman's daughter from afar. She leaves, confident that her daughter is well, for her faith in Jesus' ability to heal did not waver, even in the face of his rejection. Her courage and tenacity, her stubbornness, and her refusal to accept his limited excuse, paid off.

Many are offended by this story, and rightly so. Why is Jesus reluctant to heal a gentile? Why is he rude to the woman- cruel even? And why would the Gospel writer and a whole host of future editors, retain a story that portrays a hard-hearted Jesus who needs convincing to heal a sick child?

Well, I'm not sure there is a convincing answer to why Jesus' tone is as harsh as it sounds to us. You just can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, as they say. Some downplay the insult, translating 'dogs' as 'puppies,' for instance. Is it really less of an insult to be called a 'puppy'? Others suggest that Jesus was grumpy, tired from the crowds that followed him everywhere, and, in a moment of weakness, let one loose. This I believe. Jesus was human, after all, and who among us doesn't get tired from being hounded, no pun intended, by people day and night, asking for something?

Being human means making mistakes, saying things we don't mean, admitting our errors, growing in response to lessons learned. Christ was born human. He learned from his environment and was formed by his life experience and his encounters with people. Like us, he listened for God's word to him. Like us, he grew tired at moments, and retreated to a quiet place. He tried to escape the crowds, to nurture the introvert within. Like us, he had moments of crankiness. 'If we take our Scripture seriously, we have to allow for these possibilities, as well as the possibility that God is changed in relationship,' in this case, with the Syrophenician woman.<sup>3</sup>

Yet there is a bigger picture here in this story- something critical at stake in Jesus' response to the woman. What is at stake is the subject of Jesus' entire mission. Up until this point in Mark's Gospel, Israel was the sole subject of Jesus' mission. The Jews were the children at the table who Jesus intended to feed. They were the chosen ones, the beloved community. The Gentiles were the dogs under the table, presumably skittering around between the legs of the children, hoping for the scraps of God's grace to fall on the floor.

Jesus lived and ministered in a world where boundaries were not as porous as they are today. The Pharisees, as we see in so many stories, spent an enormous amount of energy defining and defending those boundaries. The Jewish people- long-oppressed- struggled to maintain an identity as a minority community, relying on the Scriptural promise that God had chosen them as special. When Jesus confronts a Gentile woman who exhibits faith in the promises he extols about a gracious God, a larger problem looms than whether or not he should heal her daughter. If Jesus breaks down that wall separating the Jewish people from the rest of the world, the identity of the people of God changes irreversibly. The mission statement will have to be rewritten, a new board of directors will have to be elected with Gentile representation, and Jesus' own words about God's saving action in the world will have to be edited and expanded to include the 'others' who will come seeking entry. It's a big deal, and perhaps Jesus wasn't quite sure how he felt about the proposition.

As preaching professor Tom Long describes it, "Jesus [did] not serve the vague 'God of everybody.' He [served] the scandalously particular God of Israel. He can be faithful to Israel's

God only by being loyal to God's Israel, and if Israel's Messiah is to cast out this demon from a gentile girl, it will take not enlightenment but a miracle."<sup>4</sup>

And this is when Jesus has a teachable moment. The Syrophenician woman teaches Jesus about himself, reminding him about the God who sent him into the world- a God for whom nothing was impossible. She reminded Jesus that in the divine economy, Jews may be first, but there was plenty for all to eat and be filled, a lesson Jesus had just recently taught a group of followers on a hillside with a few loaves and fish.

Have you ever been fed up with someone and felt like you needed to really tell it to them straight? Of course you have. Have you ever heard these types of difficult conversations called, 'Come to Jesus talks?' Well, that is what the Syrophenician gave to Jesus. She had a 'Come to Jesus' talk with Jesus. And Jesus, being Jesus, did not plug his ears, or walk away, as any of us are likely to do when faced with a truth we are not ready to hear. Jesus heard the woman- really listened to her, and he had a change of heart, a change in mission.

Perhaps even more remarkable than the teachable moment is the miracle the moment begets- a miracle that begins with Jesus and the woman having a conversation as equals, overcoming the barriers of gender and nationality. The miracle continues when the daughter is healed. And the miracle moves beyond that story, because never again in Mark's Gospel does Jesus refuse to heal anyone or question their worthiness. In fact, as Jesus returns to Galilee, he winds up, circuitously, in another Gentile region and there he heals a man who is both deaf and mute. The miracle of the story of the Syrophenician woman cannot be understated. It is a turning point in Jesus' ministry- the moment in which God's grace pours forth exceedingly, and none are denied its healing powers.

We are, most of us, descendants of the Gentile mission. Our faith's ancestry begins here, with this one, unnamed woman, giving Jesus a piece of her mind. Jesus heard her argument, and the walls came tumbling down. But who are we kidding? Nothing is ever that easy, and the barriers that we erect between 'us' and 'them' are sturdy suckers. We're all of us, from the early church on up until today, in need of a good 'Come to Jesus' conversation, reminding us that God's grace is sufficient for all persons in need, and the beloved community, no longer a tiny minority, makes room for everyone.

James says as much in the portion of his letter we heard this morning. Only a few generations after Jesus and the woman stood across from one another, the Christian community was fragmenting again- this time along socioeconomic lines. James offers them a scathing 'Come to Jesus' moment- 'Do you, with your acts of favoritism, really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?' 'If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?' Those are words for a very effective teachable moment.

It is not difficult to appreciate the intensity of the struggles undergone by the early church as it opened its door wide for all to enter. If we look at the modern church in North America and wrestle with our own barriers, often invisible and unspoken, we see a reflection of the early church, and it no longer seems strange and remote.<sup>5</sup> As Martin Luther King, Jr. said so eloquently in 1963, *"We must face the fact that the church is still the most segregated major institution in America. At 11 o'clock on Sunday morning when we stand and sing in Christ there*

*is no east or west, we stand at the most segregated hour in this nation...Nobody of honesty can overlook this.*” Even though we live in a world where boundaries are becoming more and more porous and the world is shrinking, even flat, as Tom Friedman suggests, we still find ourselves setting up camp in our little corner, keeping out those who are different from us. Dr. King reflects on one of the most tragic barriers that exists within the church, but it is not the only one.

The Syrophenician woman had the guts to point out a flaw in Jesus’ ministry; and James had the nerve to challenge the Christian community to take a deep look in the mirror. These teachable moments in Scripture are hard to hear, but they are vital to our survival. We cannot continue to be believers in the Glorious Lord Jesus Christ if we turn our heads away from people we find odd, or undeserving. We cannot claim to be faithful if we wish peace upon our neighbors while we set the barbed wire on top of the fence. We will not receive the grace which pours forth freely if our hearts are hardened to the needs of the sick and the desperate.

The work of being Christian is hard. Mark gives a peek that the work of being Christian was hard for Jesus, too. “Like a carpenter forcing a plane across the resistant grain of a plank or a mechanic muscling a wrench against a stubbornly rusted bolt, Jesus groans as he throws himself into doing God’s work...”<sup>6</sup> It’s not easy, and we are not alone.

‘Be opened,’ Jesus says to the man who is deaf and mute. He says it not only with compassion for someone who has suffered, but also with the authority of one who has experienced that of what he speaks. That is, after all, what the persistence of the Gentile woman said to him when he was deaf to her cries and therefore unprepared to speak of God’s love for all peoples. ‘Be opened’--- and Jesus was.

Can we be opened, too? Can we be amenable to our own teachable moments, ready for that ‘Come to Jesus’ talk when we are convicted of our faults, our indifferences, our apathies? Are we willing to be a truly open community, showing no favoritism and no exclusiveness?

During a recent episode of the public radio program, *This American Life*, author, kindergarten teacher and MacArthur Genius Grant recipient Vivian Paley tells the story of an experiment she conducted in her classroom to make children less cruel to each other.<sup>7</sup> She instituted a rule: “You can’t say ‘You can’t play.’” In other words, if two children are playing, and a third child comes over and wants to join them, they can’t tell him or her to get lost. They can’t reject him or her, such rejection being the cause of unending pain in most classrooms and playgrounds. While preliminary interviews with students about the experiment created great distress among them, it was a remarkable and immediate success. Within days, the children internalized the new rule: “You can’t say ‘You can’t play.’” And just like that, the barriers came down- almost without effort. Maybe it won’t be that easy, but why not?

<sup>1</sup> Shani Saxon-Parrish, 'Cameron Diaz on Playing the Mother of a Sick Child in 'My Sister's Keeper,' <http://www.latina.com/entertainment/movies/cameron-diaz-playing-mother-sick-child-%E2%80%9Cmy-sister-%E2%80%99s-keeper%E2%80%9D>

<sup>2</sup> Tuesday Lectionary Leanings, <http://revgalblogpals.blogspot.com/>

<sup>3</sup> Sarah Dylan, Dylan's Lectionary Blog, [http://www.sarahlaughed.net/lectionary/2006/09/proper\\_18\\_year\\_.html](http://www.sarahlaughed.net/lectionary/2006/09/proper_18_year_.html)

<sup>4</sup> Tom Long, 'Living by the Word, Reflections on the Lectionary,' *Christian Century*, August 25, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Brueggemann et al, *Texts for Preaching, Year B* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993).

<sup>6</sup> Tom Long, 'Living by the Word.'

<sup>7</sup> This American Life, *The Cruelty of Children*, [http://www.thisamericanlife.org/Radio\\_Episode.aspx?episode=27](http://www.thisamericanlife.org/Radio_Episode.aspx?episode=27)