

## Even the Dogs

September 9, 2018

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." (Mark 7:24-37)

When we encounter Jesus in a verbal sparring contest, he usually wins. His sparring partners are most often religious authorities, those with an interest in maintaining the status quo. In many cases their interests are about maintaining power, power over the decisions about religious life, power over who controls the checkbook, power in the sense of who gets to broker the stability without justice that comes with being occupied by imperial Roman forces. I say most because I assume that among Jesus' opponents there are those who have more pure intentions, that there are some who are interested in truth and true faithfulness to God, even when they hold positions that are beyond our recognition as being such. Most of the people who get into these exchanges with Jesus, exchanges that involve disagreement or contention, exchanges that require a kind of resolution, end up being exposed as motivated by self-interest or trapped within their limited understanding of the situation. But to reduce them all to being self-interested in power, to regard them as being so small in their motivations is a kind of denial of our shared humanity. We know from our honest looks in the mirror that some times we are motivated by ambition or greed or the simple desire to be right when our opinions or beliefs are challenged. But we also know that our own motivations and drives are more complicated than a simple reduction to wanting to win. And so, while it is good to be self-aware of how we can fall into lesser versions of ourselves so as to guard against our human tendency to do so, it is also good to recognize that those with whom we disagree or those who hold positions that we cannot understand, are also more complicated than any simple reduction of motivation allows.

The tendency to oversimplify into the good and the bad, who is right and who is wrong gets reinforced in most of our gospel accounts of these kinds of sparring matches. Today's reading helps shatter that prejudice, as it helps remind us that there is more going on than winning and losing in these exchanges.

Wherever we find Jesus there is a crisis. The incarnation itself provokes a crisis whenever and wherever that reality is confronted. God becoming human, the transcendent becoming temporal, the creator becoming a creature. Wherever Jesus goes there is a crisis. And by crisis here we mean the requirement to make a decision, a kind of fork in the road, a commitment to living a certain way. The good shepherd who brings comfort is the same one who turns over tables in the market. Jesus brings blessed assurance and at the same time is always a prophetic disrupter. Jesus never fits so neatly into our preferred images. Jesus came to comfort and to overthrow, to heal and to cast out demons, to welcome us home as we are here today and to provoke us to grow into the better versions of who are, to embrace who we are becoming in Christ. We find comfort in discipleship, but discipleship is always uncomfortable.

Jesus is looking for rest. He has left the rural village and his recent teachings among Jewish peasants and he has entered the gentile city of Tyre for some down-time. The people who he had just left were farmers who produced much of the food that fed the coastal region where he seeks rest. Tyre was an area with many gentile merchants and generally more wealthy than the country-side, non-jews who, being able to depend on the steady supply of food from the countryside, focused on more lucrative crops like produce. Thus, there is in the backdrop of this exchange several underlying tensions. There is the rural and largely poorer Jewish farming communities and there is the wealthier and more gentile, urban region of Tyre. When farming was good this dynamic worked well enough for both groups, the rural farming communities being the bread basket for the coastal gentile region. But over the years, when there was drought that threatened famine, an understandable resentment set in between these two groups, divided by economics as much as religion. Jesus has been among the poor in this rural area, as a Jewish prophet and teacher but has now gone away to Tyre for some quiet among people who are not his own.

She has a sick child and hears of a healer who has entered town looking for help. Their encounter, this one that we hear today between the Syrophenician woman and Jesus, is a healing story, a miracle story, and possibly also a story about the power of faith. But standing above all of these potential secondary readings and lessons, it is about the contest that ensues. We do not know if the woman is rich or poor, whether she is single or married or widowed. We do not know if she becomes what we would now call a Christian after their exchange.

She comes to Jesus looking for help. His initial response is not what we'd expect from him. In contrast to the Jesus who welcomes, the one that said let the children come to me, he seems a bit cranky and snaps. His response, rather than reflecting divine patience is all too human. He is tired and wants to be left alone. In just a few words he communicates that his mission and limited energy is for the children of Israel, not, by implication her and her child. "It wouldn't be right to give the children's food to the dogs." It is a bit nasty. His reply even includes

a racial slur. Perhaps he sees in her request not a vulnerable outsider but a request from a member of one group that has been getting more of their share than the rural Jewish farmers. Perhaps Jesus first hears not the plea of a mother but the assertiveness of one who is comfortable cutting the line and knocking on the door even while reading the sign that says, "Sorry, we are closed." Maybe that background context about the tensions between the urban and the rural, the gentile and the Jews, played a factor in his initial response. Or maybe, I am looking for a way to bail him out, to make Jesus look better than he actually is in this instance.

He tries to dismiss her but she does not give up so easily. What mother would? Her reply is respectful but direct. "The left over crumbs would be enough," she tells him. He has come at her with a verbal jab trying to brush her after-hours-request off to the side, but she takes what he gives her and uses it in her response. Dogs? If you are going to go there Jesus, let me say something about how even the dogs are treated. "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." You're tired, Jesus. Okay. How about the crumbs of your energy and compassion and healing touch. You want to save your energy and your teachings for your own people, a people who have less than what most of my neighbors and I have? Okay, but at least let us, perhaps privileged non-believers, would you please let us have whatever scraps you have left over? "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

Respectful but direct, she responded to Jesus expecting more from him and more for her child. Her words must have left a crater of silence in a long moment that followed. Did she just say that to him! *Her?! To him?!?* As the sound fell away, it's not hard to imagine Jesus reading in her eyes, "please...sir."

Her strength and courage open up a new possibility. He is moved and life as it is lived shifts. Whatever the other details were that shaped this exchange, that influenced how each of them acted and what each said, whatever we might say about tactics or respectfulness or the timing of it, Jesus recognized that she was right. He was rebuked and he learned from it, he learned from her that his initial reply was not adequate. That she and her child did deserve better. That she and her child deserved better from him. "For saying that, you may go--the demon has left your daughter." It was a verbal sparring match with more going on than winning and losing, with complicating factors on all sides, without a clear good person and bad person, but, she did get the better of him. And among the lessons we might take from this important encounter is this—she got the better of him and he was better for it.

Sometimes our faith calls us to be patient, to be obedient, or to be a steady, non-anxious presence in situations and within a world full of hype and spin and raw nerves. But other times being faithful requires that we speak up and bring our own chair if there is not yet one for us at the table. Being bold is not the opposite of being faithful or humble or respectful. And being corrected when we are wrong is no defeat. It takes courage to speak up when the situation calls

for it. And it takes courage to change our minds and hearts when we have been rightfully corrected or shown a better way. Being bold and growing from our mistakes, these too are part of following Christ.

Whether you feel threatened and emboldened by her claim that Syrophoenician lives matter, whether that makes you want to shout “Amen” or let out a sigh that the sermon just got political, there is a lesson and encouragement for all of us in our scripture here. Sometimes we need to stand up and speak without waiting any longer to be invited to do so. And sometimes we need to sit down and listen without interrupting or dismissing or resisting the boldness encountering us. Sometimes Jesus is standing up with us and sometimes Jesus is sitting alongside us. Jesus brings a crisis, a challenge, that undeniable proclamation that your life will never be the same. To say that the life of her child matters had no bearing, no rejection or denial anyway, on whether or not many other lives also mattered.

Syrophoenician lives matter. Black police lives matter. Immigrant children’s lives matter. Rural farmers lives matter. Roman soldiers lives matter. Patriot fans lives matter. Houston Texan lives matter. Don’t trip over the details and hangups that emerge when you are trying to walk the difficult path of following Christ. God’s love is not as narrow as our own prejudices, whether those prejudices incline us to the left or right politically.

Your child is healed. Hear his voice. Your child is healed. Now, you may go. Amen.

Rev. Jason M. Donnelly, Ph.D.  
Pastor, Roslindale Congregational Church, UCC  
Boston, Massachusetts