

Scripture for Sunday Sept 9th 2018

Mark 7:24-37 (NIV)

²⁴ Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret. ²⁵ In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an impure spirit came and fell at his feet. ²⁶ The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷ “First let the children eat all they want,” he told her, “for it is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.” ²⁸ “Lord,” she replied, “even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” ²⁹ Then he told her, “For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter.” ³⁰ She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

³¹ Then Jesus left the vicinity of Tyre and went through Sidon, down to the Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis. ³² There some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk, and they begged Jesus to place his hand on him. ³³ After he took him aside, away from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers into the man’s ears. Then he spit and touched the man’s tongue. ³⁴ He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, “Ephphatha!” (which means “Be opened!”). ³⁵ At this, the man’s ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly. ³⁶ Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone. But the more he did so, the more they kept talking about it. ³⁷ People were overwhelmed with amazement. “He has done everything well,” they said. “He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.”

Sermon: Little Dogs and Little Children

Today’s story of the encounter between Jesus and the Syrophenician woman¹ is often viewed as a troubling embarrassment. A sincere foreign woman *begs* help from Jesus because her daughter has an evil spirit. We expect Jesus to say, “Of course I will save your daughter.” Instead, Jesus appears to exhibit racism and insensitivity to her suffering as he insults her, quite possibly in public. Yes, he does finally heal her daughter, but only after the quick-witted mother demonstrates a willingness to be humiliated. We inevitably ask, why is *this* woman given such a hard time? In the other gospels, Jesus converses freely with a Samaritan woman at a well,² without being asked, he raises to life the only son of a widow,³ and has his feet anointed with expensive perfume by a woman known as a “sinner.”⁴ In Mark’s gospel, Jesus has already healed a woman with a hemorrhaging condition,⁵ and cast out demons from a gentile

¹ This gentile woman is termed “Syrian Phoenician” to distinguish her from a North African “Libyan Phoenician.”

² John 4:1-42.

³ Luke 7:11-17.

⁴ Luke 7:36-50.

⁵ Mark 5:25-34. See <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Don%20Be-Afraid-Only-Believe-1.pdf>

man sending them into a herd of pigs.⁶ Jesus is no stranger to non-Jewish women, or to exorcising demons, so what is going on with this gentile woman from the region of Tyre? Mark's presentation of this encounter doesn't paint Jesus in a very compassionate light, and although Matthew's account⁷ gives a different spin and adds more detail, this incident is still very troubling. What are we to make of this story both then, and for today?

A number of ways have been proposed to interpret the story. Some simply dismiss it as inauthentic – an addition written by later conservative Jewish Christians who were opposed to the church's gentile mission. However, Matthew's gospel has the same incident and he also places it following the discussion with the Pharisees and experts of the law about the nature of ritual "uncleanness" or "defilement." I talked about that last week.⁸ Both gospel writers make it explicitly clear that *what* you eat and *how* you prepare your food does not make a person unholy before God; it is a matter of the attitudes and actions that arise from of the human heart.⁹ Consequently, it seems most unlikely that the gist of today's incident *didn't* happen. Indeed, the story's harsh language makes it memorable and is one good reason why it became part of the collective oral tradition concerning Jesus of Nazareth.

Others, therefore, see the story as authentic and try to rationalize the behavior of Jesus. For example, some say that Jesus was just having a bad day because he was tired after his earlier disputes with the Pharisees! He therefore tried to get a rest in the region of Tyre, but his reputation preceded him and he was recognized.¹⁰ However, if he needed a rest, surely he would have withdrawn to the hill country. It makes *more* sense to say he went to the region of Tyre because he wanted to spread his message to the Jews who lived in this predominantly gentile region. Some others say that Jesus was *always* going to heal her and, through the discussion, he was "testing her faith." That's certainly how Matthew presents this incident; but that does *not* come across in Mark's account. Some go further and claim that the harshness of Jesus' rhetoric was intended as a joke, or that he spoke with a knowing smile, a twinkle in his eye, or with a wink! How can we possibly know that?! Still others see this story as presenting Jesus as a typical Jewish man of his day, with the same chauvinistic attitudes toward women and superiority toward non-Jews.¹¹ The woman's clever reply is therefore seen as confronting, shaming and convincing a reluctant Jesus that Gentiles must be able to share in God's goodness. If that were the case, we would expect to see that same attitude repeated throughout the Gospels in similar circumstances and, as I mentioned earlier, we don't. Taken at face value, this is all a bit of a puzzle, partly because of the brevity of the account. And so this story becomes one of many "hard sayings" of Jesus and is a bit of a banana-skin for preachers – perhaps especially for *male* preachers!

⁶ Mark 5:1-20.

⁷ Matt 15:21-28.

⁸ <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Evil-Comes-From-The-Inside.pdf>

⁹ Mark 7:19-23; Matt 15:17-20.

¹⁰ Mark 7:24.

¹¹ Moreover, "good" Jewish rabbis would *not* converse with women in public, especially gentile women.

The offensive term that people often zero in on is Jesus' mention of "dogs" in reference to a foreign woman. Jesus is not the only public figure who makes use of that term! As we consider this strange conversation, we need to be aware of the following background information. First, Jews often referred to Gentiles as "dogs,"¹² and what Gentiles said about Jews was usually just as uncomplimentary. There is no doubt this was meant as a degrading insult. For Jews, dogs were *not* seen as pets because they were ritually "unclean."¹³ They lived out-doors as semi-wild guard dogs. Jewish households may have thrown them the crap food, but more generally, dogs were dangerous street scavengers that lived off garbage. Some wealthy Greeks and Romans were known to have kept small dogs as pets. Now, the Greek word Mark uses for "dog" here would better be translated as "puppy" or, perhaps, "doggie." Perhaps that is what was intended here.¹⁴

Second, we must consider the local context of being in the region of the Mediterranean port city of Tyre.¹⁵ A city can only exist if the surrounding regions provide the necessary food and other goods to sustain it. Tension therefore existed between the Jewish farming populace and those who lived in the gentile cities of Tyre and Sidon. Some Jews would naturally resent giving up their food, especially in hard times, for their gentile land-owners or for rich city-dwellers. In light of that, Jesus' phrase, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs"¹⁶ takes on added meaning.

Even so, Jesus was very conscious that his mission was *primarily* to Jews, *not* gentiles.¹⁷ Indeed, when the gospel writers include an encounter with a non-Jewish person - like here, or in the healing of the Roman centurion's servant¹⁸ - we take them to be most exceptional situations. Jesus was proclaiming that the kingdom of God was *at hand* and while Jesus wasn't denying that Gentiles have a claim God's love and mercy, his time for ministry was limited. You can't proclaim that kind of message within that political and religious context without causing a reaction from those in power. Jesus knew that a reaction would eventually come,¹⁹ and it could happen at any time, so he did not want to be diverted from his primary mission and was also mindful of where he travelled. He was aware that unwanted publicity in this region at this time could send all the wrong kinds of signals to both Gentiles and to

¹² That "dog" was a degrading insult is evidenced here: 1 Sam 17:43; Prov 26:11; Isa 56:1–11; Matt 7:6; Phil 3:2.

¹³ The notable exception was Tobit's dog that was his companion! (Tob 6:2).

¹⁴ We don't know for sure because we don't know which language Jesus was speaking. If he was speaking Aramaic, there is no such distinction with reference to "dog/puppy"; there *is* a distinction in Greek. We can, however, assume that Jesus was able to converse in Greek. He was, after all, raised in Nazareth. Just 4 miles away there was a new capital city, Sepphoris, being built/developed and it is not unreasonable to think that Joseph and Jesus may have found work there in the building trade.

¹⁵ Furthermore, during the Jewish war of 66-70 AD, troops from Tyre served Rome in the devastation of Galilee. Consequently, in Mark's day, Tyre was a bitter enemy.

¹⁶ Mark 7:27. (see also Matt 15:26.)

¹⁷ That is certainly Matthew's understanding, see Matt 15:24; 10:6.

¹⁸ Matt 8:5-13; Luke 7:1-10.

¹⁹ Don't forget that John the Baptist had already been executed; Mark 6:14-29.

those in power in urban centers. While I think this explanation of the overall context is valid, it does not excuse or explain Jesus' apparentness rudeness - as Mark records it.

The woman's bold reply is remarkable: "Sir, even the [little] dogs under the table eat the [little] children's crumbs."²⁰ Her response is *not* to say, "Don't call me a dog!" She replies on *his* terms, accepting Jesus mission is primarily for the Jews, yet she turns the insult surrounding the word "dog" to her own advantage. By moving the "little dog" to being "*under the table*," the animal not an unclean "outsider" but an "insider" in the woman's response. This little dog is therefore an associate member of the family who, though not *at* the table, nevertheless, still plays under it and benefits from the children's excess food. The Syrophenician woman's quick-thinking, earnestness, and persistence results in Jesus saying, "For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter." And she went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.²¹ This miracle is "at a distance" and Jesus knows that it has been accomplished, such is his authority. In a sense, the miracle is incidental to Mark's telling of the story; the main point is the conversation.

But there is even more to it than that. Mark includes the story because the central figure is a *Greek* woman and he includes it to illustrate this important aspect of the early church's mission. Mark's underlying theological point is all about God's overall plan in history. As I mentioned earlier, Mark places this incident just after the discussion pertaining to ritual purity. Consequently, there is a broader, common theme underlying this chapter: unclean hands and unclean food moves on to unclean gentiles and unclean spirits. Jesus not only has authority over demons, sure evidence that God's reign is at hand, but God's grace extends to those whom Jews thought were outside of God's mercy - namely, unclean gentiles. Jesus reinterprets the Mosaic law in shocking ways and demonstrates the inclusivity of God's grace by healing a gentile girl. The bread – the kingdom of God – is *not* just for Jews, but for "outsiders," and the little dogs under the table don't have to wait until the meal is all over to receive the benefits.²² Mark is proclaiming that religious and cultural barriers and old taboos are all being swept away; "dogs" will become children alongside all the others in God's family. And, interpreted politically, the kingdom of God transcends any claims of the Roman Empire as being truly universal. We should not overlook that point in times of increasing narrow-minded nationalism.

Added to this underlying theme of grace over law, that Jesus has *God's* authority to declare unclean

²⁰ Mark 7:28. The use of *kyrios* is subtle; this word means "sir," "master," or "Lord" – the latter is very important in a Christological context. The NRSV translates it as "Sir," as part of the narrative. The NIV translates it as "Lord," i.e., interpreting it theologically and seeing her response as a statement of faith. Since Mark does not stress the woman's *faith* at all, we *cannot* justify making that connection. In Matt 15:22, however, the woman addresses Jesus as "kyrios, Son of David." That added, messianic reference make the translation as "Lord" most credible, more so since her faith is also highlighted (see Matt 15:28).

²¹ Mark 7:29-30; see also Matt 15:28.

²² The inclusion of the Gentiles and the fulfillment of the eschatological (prophetic) promises are a sign of the presence of the kingdom of God. In other words, the dogs (gentiles) "under the table don't have to wait until the meal is all over," they can receive the benefits *now*. Mark, thereby, addresses any doubters as to the legitimacy of the church's mission to the gentiles; Jesus clearly intended the gentile mission, says Mark.

things clean, Mark presents a stark contrast between the Jewish religious leaders and this gentile woman. Recall that Jesus called those the pharisees and legal experts' "hypocrites" and quoted the prophet Isaiah, "The LORD said: 'These people draw near me; they *honor me with their lips, while their heart is far from me.* . . .'"²³ The opposite of hypocrisy is *authenticity*, and that is what we see in the Syrophoenician woman. Despite the social taboos, she comes to Jesus and fell at his feet wanting mercy and grace. Having a new heart, as the prophet's proclaimed, is what it is all about and the Syrophoenician women's coming to Christ, her persistence, and her response reveals *her* good heart.

Mark ends this section with another healing. A man was deaf and had difficulty speaking. Jesus heals both issues and all the people praise God.²⁴ The gospel writers often depict the healing of blindness and deafness as having a double meaning. Mark tells us that one of Jesus' catchphrases was, "He who has ears let him hear."²⁵ Behind this graphic healing is the implication that even gentiles are hearing and understanding the good news that the kingdom of God is at hand and they too are praising God. Mark proclaims that message with a bullhorn! He wants his readers to fully recognize and understand what God is doing in the here and now through Jesus the Messiah. The final punchline is "He has done everything well," and the astute Jew would recognize those words as echoing God's thoughts on the seventh day of creation.²⁶ Jesus is indeed "Lord of the Sabbath," the legitimate interpreter of the Law.

What are we to make of this today?

Quite understandably, to our modern ears, the words of Jesus are offensive. However, that then poses the uncomfortable question, "Who might we treat like "dogs" today?" People of other colour, or other cultures, or whose first language is not English? Immigrants? Refugees? We might not verbalise our thoughts in the derogatory way Mark tells us that Jesus did, but even if we don't, what are the *attitudes* in our hearts? If we have disdain, then we need to hear the message that God's love crosses the human boundaries of gender, religion, and ethnic origin. It seems to me, as an immigrant myself, that racism often lies beneath the thin veneer of politeness or political correctness in Canada. It is also present in churches; that was true in 1st century and it is still true in the 21st century. We are not yet ready for God's reign to come in all its fullness.

Where are the disciples in all of this? Mark does not mention them!²⁷ Perhaps the better question is, "Where are *we* in all of this?" Will we continue to follow Jesus even when he refers to all of us here as "dogs"? If we will - I am trust *we will* - then we need to recognize that we are just like the Syrophoenician woman, "outsiders" who become "honourary Jews" by of the grace of God. Amen.

²³ Isa 29:13 LXX. (The Greek LXX is more pertinent here than the Hebrew MS.) See also Isa 6:9–10.

²⁴ In Mark's view, Jesus performed the mighty acts of God's salvation during his earthly ministry, that his intention was that these remain "hidden" (i.e., Mark's "messianic secret") until after the resurrection. These two stories contain elements of "pre-Easter hiddenness" and "post-Easter revelation"!

²⁵ Mark 4:9; see also Matt 11:15; 13:9.

²⁶ Gen 1:31 (LXX); see also Isa 35:5.

²⁷ Matt 15:23 includes the disciples!