

## **The Sassy Syrophenician**

### **Mark 7:24-30**

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,  
and 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.

# **The Sassy Syrophoenician**

Mark 7:24-30

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## **I.**

Today's scripture reading from Mark is, quite frankly, nothing short of a remarkable reminder to Jesus, and to our church, about what is most important in this world: that we would be wise to pay great attention to those in our midst who present to us with pluck, spirit and, yes, even a little bit of sass. To be perfectly honest, I just couldn't resist the alliteration of "The Sassy Syrophoenician" for the title to today's sermon; though, a close second was "The Witty Woman of Syrophenicia." Either way, this unnamed woman clearly possessed all the pluck and spirit for which one could ever hope; and, perhaps, just the right amount of sass as well. She gets right up in Jesus' "grill," gives him "what for" and takes him both to task and to school. She also reminds us, that when the well-being of a child is at stake, bold and brash action is required.

## **II.**

Before we get into all of that, however, let us get the easy stuff out of the way. "Syrophoenician" refers to an inhabitant or resident of Phoenicia when it was part of the Roman province of Syria; which abuts Israel to the north. Why Jesus would be found traveling so far from home, to the cities of Tyre and Sidon, we can only speculate. Perhaps he was seeking to avoid some kind of threat from the political or religious leaders back in Israel. Or, as the passage indicates, he might simply have sought a little break from his ministry, as we are told he entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Though he might have been in a strange land, he certainly was no stranger. He could not escape notice of the local inhabitants, and the people there soon came to him seeking the healing and miracles for which he was known; seemingly both far and wide.

## **III.**

Among these seekers, was our aforementioned but nameless Syrophoenician woman. She *begged* Jesus to heal her daughter who, we are told, was at home in bed ailing from a demon; most probably some medical

malady understood to be caused by such a malevolent spirit. The response Jesus gives the woman, however, is *utterly* shocking; both in the lack of compassion and, especially, in its lamentable cruelty. 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.*”

Now, over the centuries everyone from brilliant Biblical scholars to plain old parish preachers have tried to smooth out such a rough-edged remark; saying that Jesus understood his mission to be to the descendants of Abraham, and not to the Gentiles or nations. Which very well may have been the case, but as is so true in all of life’s endeavors, it isn’t only *what* you do, it is *how* you do it.

#### IV.

Just as Jesus decided not to mince words, neither should we. This was a *wholly* inappropriate, crass, and utterly insensitive response to someone who was clearly hurting and in need. On a scale of one to ten, even the Russian judge gives Jesus a one. No question he *could* have, and *should* have, done better. While I would encourage us to hold’s Jesus’ feet to the fire, we should certainly also endeavor to understand and forgive *him* his trespasses, as we, ourselves, seek to have our trespasses forgiven *by* him. Let us not forget, that our Christological understanding of Jesus the Christ holds him to be *both* fully divine and, *also*, fully human. In this particular episode (I think we can agree) Jesus is, perhaps, being all *too* human. I am sure we each can relate to the experience of having an empty tank, an overflowing plate, and feeling the exasperation which ensues when even *one* more thing comes along; especially, a thing which we really don’t consider to necessarily even be our concern.

#### V.

When I first started out in ministry, there was guy in one of my churches who I’ll call “Bill”; because Bill was his name. Bill once told me something I did not like hearing at the time because I disagreed with it from the moment he spoke it. Over the years, I’ve grown to like it even less; mostly because I finally had to admit that what Bill said to me is absolutely true: “*We treat people the way we can afford to treat people.*”

At least to some degree, what afforded Jesus such a response was the fact that the Syrophenician woman was what might be termed “triple

marginalized.” Not only was she a *foreigner* and a *Gentile*, she was also a *woman*; so others, including Jesus, afforded her absolutely nothing at all. However, the Syrophenician woman could ill afford *not* to avail *herself* of any and all opportunities as they related to the health and well-being of her child. And, so, she did something amazing: she spoke truth to power.

## VI.

Challenging Jesus directly, face to face, and with no small amount of sass, the Syrophenician woman replied to Jesus: “*Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.*” WOW! Could you even begin to imagine saying such a thing to the *one* person you believed held the life of your child in their hands? Perhaps it was more the case that the Syrophenician woman imagined saying such a thing was the *only* thing that could save the life of her child. From such a perspective, who could blame her?

What happened next was as remarkable as it was startling. The scripture relates: “*Then Jesus 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.*” Which begs an interesting question: was the daughter healed due to the courage and faith of the *mother* to speak both her truth and her need, or did *Jesus* heal the child as a response to what the woman had said?

## VII.

This is not an insignificant question. More often than not people of faith understand their role in God’s ever-unfolding plan for this world as passive observers awaiting an invitation to become part of the show; like a 40 years in the wilderness kind of thing. What *this* episode demonstrates, however, is that *our* role in God’s purposes is much more direct and, apparently, almost instantaneous. We *always* have a seat at the table, if we have the wherewithal, the gumption, the sass to pull out the chair and sit down. We just need to get ourselves *to* the table; to the moment, to the circumstance, to the physical location, to the mindset and to the heart-space where God is present and, then, speak our truth and our need. Where such places exist we cannot control or predict. Based on today’s passage, however, it would seem that we *can* pursue it and, even, *cause* it to come into existence; with the right amount of spirit, pluck and sass.

## VIII.

I know people often speak about finding God in the sunset, the natural world or the golf course; which certainly may be true. However, to improve one's odds the best way to have an experience *of* God and *with* God, is to put oneself in the place and space where God is most readily to be found: in and at a church; it's worship, fellowship, and mission. Except when a church's worship is uninspired, its fellowship flat or fake, and its mission muddled. Except when a church, or it's leaders, get so tied up in the rules and regulations and doing things decently and in order that they forsake compassion and mercy. Except when the forest that is the church obscures the individual trees which are it's members. Except when the great many *other* tasks and responsibilities with which a church must contend, though valid, come to overshadow or crowd out the *one* task central to the church's existence: break the bread and share it all around; even, and especially, the crumbs.

## IX.

Today, we begin a new year of Church School and mark the occasion with a blessing upon the children of our church; which is a long-standing tradition here on the Park. What makes this year *different*, however, are the changes we are making to the physical space of our church building in recognition of not only the *needs* of our growing congregation and the bounty of young families, but also to better alignment ourselves with the *priorities* we have set as a congregation to be a church which welcomes, honors, and supports our children. Because, make no mistake about it, these are *our* children. Yes, it is our great *privilege* to have all these kids running around, but these kids are also our great *responsibility*. and we need to advocate for them with the same degree of spirit, pluck and, yes, just the right amount of sass as the Syrophenician woman advocated for her daughter.

## X.

I would end today by not only reiterating the words I shared with you from a member of my former church, but also by standing them on their head. So, I ask you, how can we afford to treat the children of our church? Will it be with crumbs that fall to floor, or with an invitation to the table to come, eat and be filled?

I would ask three things of you this day. First, keep our Church School Director, Andrea, in prayer. While we have our heads bowed and hands clasped, let us also be praying for both the current children of our church, as well as the children on their way to us. In the spirit of the movie *Field of Dreams*, we have built it so now we should have every expectation that they will come. However, as we all recognize, there is great demand placed upon kids and their parents these days in terms of their time and energy. Let us be praying for a spirit of discernment for those having to make hard choices about what to do or not to do, as well as an understanding of the ultimate value of those choices.

## **XI.**

Second, I would like to ask *everyone*, but especially kids and their parents, to take a stroll down to the nursery and Selleck Room before you leave today. While it will be mid-October before the cabinets, counter, and sink are installed in the nursery, and the Selleck Room is as of yet unfurnished, go see these spaces for yourself so we each can begin to envision what they might become and how they might be utilized.

With respect to what we can afford in terms of dollars and cents, we have about \$20k remaining in the budget for furniture and appointments. Which should take us quite a distance, but if we need more funding we'll find it. That said, the financial aspect of what we can afford, is really the least of it. The real question is what are we willing to afford in terms of our time, energy, and breadth of imagination.

## **XII.**

Which brings us to the third and most challenging request I would make this day: let us consider how we might change our approach and mindset regarding children in the church. While many remarkable things occur in today's scripture reading from Mark, arguably the most profound is how the sassy Syrophenician woman expanded the sense and scope that Jesus had of his own mission.

While Church School and Youth Group have been the typical approaches to children in the church, how might we expand our understanding of the mission we have to children? Might we utilize the Selleck Room for a few hours after school a couple days a week for kids to come do homework, be

tutored, have a snack, or just be social without the media? Maybe an occasional movie or activity night, or kid's book group, or dance, or pizza party? Frankly, the opportunities are endless and really just a matter of how much pluck, spirit, and sass we can manage to muster. When the well-being of children is at stake, bold and brash action is required. Amen.