

The Sassy Syrophoenician

Mark 7:24-30

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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 Syrophoenician 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.

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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 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 Syrophoenicia." 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's 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; more 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’m 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 didn’t 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 Syrophoenician 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 Syrophoenician 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 Syrophoenician 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 Syrophoenician 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 to speak our truth and our need. Where such a places exists 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, 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.

Over the past few weeks, and within the limits of COVID, weather, and scheduling, Linda and I have endeavored to get as many church families as possible out to the lake for some fun and fellowship. Regrettably, we were unable to welcome everyone we wanted to, but console ourselves knowing there is always next summer. We did, though, manage to have fifty folks make it out. With COVID preventing us from offering a church school program, nursery experience, or active youth group, not only are the kids of our church getting the short end of the stick (again) but, more regretfully, they are growing up in leaps and bounds and we are missing all that fun. And I'm here to tell you, these kids at our church, they are a *ton* of fun. Full of spirit, pluck and, yes, just the right amount of sass. Not sass as disrespectful, but sass as direct and witty and, most definitely, amusing.

X.

The experience of swimming, boating, floating, fishing, kayaking, tubing, jet skiing and the sharing of good food and good times with these kids and their families has served to remind me, as the Syrophenician woman reminded Jesus, that the nurture, enjoyment and well-being of our children is what matters most...always. Sometimes this requires the bread that is bold and

brash action. More often than not, though, it simply requires a few fish on a line; mere crumbs if you will.

I leave you today with photos from the past few weeks of beautiful kids, loving mothers and fathers and adoring grandparents. I think you will find them to be a sufficient reminder to all us of both the important role our church plays in the lives of these children and families, and what a great privilege and joy it is to have so many kids and so much love here in our church. A church filled with spirit, pluck and, yes, just the right amount of sass; and, no small amount of fun. Amen.

(If you are reading or downloading this sermon directly from the church website, the photos have not been included as a matter of privacy. However, if you would like to see them, please email Rev. Mike and he can email them to you directly).