“Be Opened”

Mark 7:24-37

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She’s in a panic. Her life has been turned upside down. Her world has come crashing down around her. Her child’s life is in danger and she will do anything to protect and help her. She is at the end of her rope and has run out of time. Out of desperation, as a last resort, she approaches someone who might just be able to help her. This person is of a different ethnicity and religion than her. He is a visitor in her homeland, maybe even a little unwelcome.

And yet, she knows that this may be her last chance. Drawing up her last bits of courage and strength, she approaches the man and begs him to save her daughter’s life. With tears pouring down her cheeks, she hands up her daughter to the man, who grabs her and passes her to the soldier behind him. Equal parts relief and deep, deep grief fill her as she watches the soldier who walks away with her daughter until she can no longer be seen. Defeated, she turns to head back to whatever uncertainty still faces her back at home.

That was the scene in the Kabul airport last week, but it could just as easily had been the scene 2000 years ago for the Syrophoenician woman from today’s Gospel reading. When we read this text, we can imagine this woman having the same desperate thought that parents all over Afghanistan have had over the past month - I will do anything to save my child.

The parents in Kabul risked never seeing their children again as they handed them up to Marines perched on a concrete wall above them. The Syrophoenician woman risked crossing gender, religious, and ethnic barriers to save her child.

Which is why, for me, the Jesus of this story is a little hard for me to stomach. When I think about this woman and her sick child and all that she was willing to do to save her, and then, when I think of Jesus’s response, I am more than a little troubled.

Because...Jesus’s initial response to the woman goes against the image of Jesus that I have in my head. It goes against the Jesus who welcomes the children, who feeds the 5,000, who rails against injustice, who humbles himself on his knees washing his disciples’ feet, who, in the midst of agony on the cross, makes sure to find someone to look after his mother. It is an image of Jesus that I have struggled with all week.

The text tells us that the Syrophoenician woman, upon hearing that Jesus was in her region, goes to him immediately. She bows down before him and begs him to cleanse her daughter of the demon that possessed her. Jesus replies with this somewhat cryptic phrase saying, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

It is helpful to understand the Syrophoenician woman’s background in order to understand Jesus’s reply. First of all, by saying, “Syrophoenician,” Mark is indicating that this woman is not Jewish, she is a Gentile. In fact, according to some accounts, she would most likely be a pagan as well. She’s also a woman who is unrelated to Jesus. The text tells us that Jesus has left the crowds behind and is hidden away in a house. This means that the woman has approached a man to whom she is unrelated, which would have been expressly forbidden. Also, many of the Jews who were living in this region were often oppressed by the rich residents of Tyre. They were exploited and taken advantage of and perhaps the Syrophoencian woman played a role in the oppression. This woman has broken a plethora of social norms by approaching Jesus.

And Jesus is aware of this. He knows that she is as opposite of someone who should approach Jesus as they come. And perhaps this is why his gut reaction is to say what he says: “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

Essentially, Jesus is calling this woman a dog. There’s really no way around it. Scholars and laypeople alike throughout the years have been uncomfortable with Jesus’s response and have tried to find reasons behind why he would say this. The word that Jesus uses in Greek technically means small dog, like a pet, even. But the Jews never had dogs as pets. Ever. Dogs were seen as unclean. A Jewish person would never look at a dog and think, “Aww, how sweet!” In fact, one orthodox rabbi recently told a theologian that he’d never heard of any current orthodox rabbi who owned a dog. As much as the dog lover in me pains to say it, dogs are still considered unclean for some Jewish people today and were definitely considered unclean for all of the Jewish people of Jesus’s day.

Still other scholars, trying to soften Jesus’s tone, have said that later editions of Mark added that awful line in and that what Jesus meant was more along the lines of, “Charity begins at home” meaning, the Jesus is here for the Jewish people first.

But many scholars today make it clear: this is not Jesus at his pastoral best.

So what are we to do with this Jesus with whom we may find ourselves uncomfortable?

Perhaps the answer lies somewhere in our understanding of what it means for Jesus to be fully divine *and* fully human, *and* what Jesus’s humanity might mean for us.

Jesus being fully human, fully divine is something that we affirm as Christians, but do we really think about what that means? We celebrate Christ’s humanity at his birth and we solemnly acknowledge it again at his death, but what do we do with the in-between?

For Jesus to be fully human, it means that he experienced all of the same kinds of emotions that we experience — joy, anger, pain — Jesus experienced them all. Jesus also experienced having a human body. Jesus laughed with his friends. He cried when Lazarus died. His stomach grumbled when he was hungry. Maybe he even got a little cranky when he was hungry.

I think I can feel you all itching to ask the question then - if Jesus was fully human, does that mean he sinned? That has been the question I’ve struggled with all week.

My gut response is - no. Jesus did not sin. He couldn’t be fully divine if he was sinful. Our Westminster Confession affirms this: The Son of God, the second Person in the Trinity, being very and eternal God, of one substance, and equal with the Father, did, when the fullness of time was come, take upon him man’s nature, with all the essential properties and common infirmities thereof; yet *without sin*.

So what are we to do, then, with Jesus’ response to a woman in desperate need?

If this episode had simply ended with Jesus calling the woman a dog, if the woman had turned away, defeated, then I think we would seriously need to have a conversation about whether or not Jesus was sinful. But because the story ends the way it does — with the woman matching wits with Jesus and even besting him — because of that, we can have an important conversation about what it means to be human.

Part of being human means growth and part of growth means growing pains. Perhaps instead of looking at this moment as a time in which Jesus might have sinned, we look at it instead as a time in which Jesus had that all-too-human experience of being wrong, being called out, and being changed in that moment.

When the woman responds to Jesus with her line: “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs,” she is offering Jesus a chance to be changed, to be corrected in his thinking.

Up until this point, Jesus’s ministry had been solely to the Jewish people. In fact, when this story takes place in Matthew, as Jesus refuses to help the woman he adds, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Perhaps that is what he is thinking when the woman approaches him in Mark — that he was there firstly for the Jewish people in Tyre, the ones who really needed him.

But the woman is brave enough to show him a different way. She “yes, ands” Jesus. Yes, I may be a dog, but I still have needs. I still hunger.” Yes, she may be a Gentile, but that doesn’t change the fact that her daughter is seriously ill.

In that moment, Jesus has a choice. He can double-down and refuse to help the woman. Or he can be changed. And Jesus chooses change. He answers her, “For saying that, you may go — the demons have left your daughter.”

And because of the woman’s bravery, and Jesus’s willingness to be changed, not only is the daughter is healed, but Jesus allows himself to expand his mission along view. Might it be possible that God has sent him, not only to save his people, but to save all of God’s children?

The second healing story from today’s Gospel passage shows us how Jesus continues to change and expand his sense of call. In this healing story, Jesus heals the man in an incredibly intimate way. Here is another Gentile, and Jesus takes him away privately, puts his fingers in the deaf man’s hears, and uses his own spit to heal the man’s muteness. Jesus tells the man, “Be opened.” And he is. The man is healed and is restored back to his Gentile life.

In these two stories, Jesus shows us what it means to be opened and to be transformed in the process. One aspect of sin is when we stubbornly remain set in our ways, even when we know we’re wrong. When we are able to recognize patterns of sin in our lives and actively change our ways, we are doing just it means to be human — changing and growing. In these stories, Jesus shows us that he understands one of the most important aspects of what it means to be human — being open to being opened.

It may be uncomfortable. It may involve us admitting we were wrong. It may force us to reconsider some of the most important relationships in our lives, but we are still called to open ourselves to being changed. And when that change is especially hard, what a relief it is to know that the One to whom we pray has also had those growing pains and knows our struggles.

Friends, may we have the courage to follow in Christ’s footsteps and welcome the Syrophoenician women whom God places in our lives to show us new opportunities for growth and may we find ourselves being opened in the process.

All praise be to God.

Amen.