

Mark 7:24-37, 2015

24 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, 25 but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. 26 Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. 27 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." 28 But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." 29 Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." 30 So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

31 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. 32 They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. 33 He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. 34 Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." 35 And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. 36 Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. 37 They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."

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These two stories are clearly healing stories, not unlike so many of the other stories we have heard from the gospels.

But, they are different from many of the others however in that these stories happen outside the territory of the Jews, outside Galilee, and in fact involve non-Jewish people, Gentiles, who are in need of Jesus' help.

As the first story opens Jesus has left Galilee to find some respite from all the demands of ministry.

He didn't want anyone to know where he was but of course he is found first by a Gentile woman whose daughter has a demon.

She wants Jesus to cast it out.

Then he traveled toward Galilee and was found by a group of friends among whom there was a man who was deaf and mute.

His friends wanted Jesus to cure him.

Now, the woman has a very interesting conversation with Jesus.

It is one that is shocking and surprising to us who read it in these days.

This woman has come, driven by her love and concern for her daughter—maybe her desperation for relief for her daughter for whom she has doubt that there is any hope.

Demon possession is something that requires divine intervention and whatever her faith, there has been no relief.

And so she seeks out Jesus, who is hiding in a house in hopes of not being discovered,

And what does she get for her trouble?

“Let the children be fed first...it isn't fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs”

Jesus calls this woman a dog and refuses her request, or so it seems!

This woman comes to Jesus knowing she can make no claim of worth, no merit, no priority standing because she isn't a Jew.

She knows there is nothing to commend her to Jesus.

But, she humbles herself before Jesus as she makes her request. She bows at Jesus' feet.

She acknowledges her standing as a Gentile dog and yet persists in her humility.

She doesn't let it go. She persists in her request that Jesus cast this demon out of her daughter;

“Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.”

Jesus says to her, because you said this, the demon has left your daughter;

and she discovered it was so when she went home.

Now, there are many arguments that can be made to soften the tone of Jesus' response to the woman,

but today I am not going to make excuses for that, because something else catches my attention.

Jesus, it appears, changes his mind.

This too is shocking!

Now throughout scripture it is not often that God changes His mind.

The story that immediately comes to mind is the story of Abraham who has a conversation with God to try to spare Sodom and Gomorrah for the sake of the lives of the good people who live there, even if there are only 10.

Then there is the story of Jonah when God changes His mind and decides to not destroy the city of Nineveh because they have changed their ways.

I don't know about you but I grew up believing that God didn't change God's mind.

This all certainly flies in the face of that.

Now Jesus has changed His mind.

So, what is going on here?

Does this say something about Jesus?

As I thought about this and read what little I could find on the matter this week,

and not many take this question on, the question that took shape in my mind was,

“What did it really mean for Jesus to be *fully divine* and *fully human* as we understand he was?

What struggles did Jesus experience with the fully human side of His being, and does this story reveal anything about that?

Is it possible that Jesus, in His humanity, was subjected to, and on this occasion fell prey to some lack of clarity about His mission, or the prejudice toward Gentiles that was pervasive in the culture of His day?

Certainly He had the power and advantage of His divinity to overcome the power of the world and evil.

We see that revealed in the story of His temptation in the wilderness for forty days and forty nights.

We understand that Jesus came to know our pain and suffering through His own,

But was it only in His scourging, crucifixion and death that he experienced that,

or was it all along the way that led to that day.

This event is the recorded changing point in Jesus’ ministry as it now includes the Gentiles.

The next story of the deaf mute cured by Jesus is evidence enough of that.

I also wonder if this passage says something about us, and how we live in relationship with Jesus.

Does this story give us some perspective on how we come to Jesus in our time of need?

The woman who comes to Jesus for her daughter meets with a response that is most unkind.

How do you respond when someone treats you like that?

Most people's pride would be so hurt they would not have been able to ask for help with the persistence the woman had,

and in fact may turn away in anger because they thought they deserved what they asked for.

I am amazed by peoples sense of entitlement these days.

In that situation you may convince yourself you can handle the problem on your own and walk away when you don't feel so desperate for yourself or your children.

Then there is the matter of who wants to be likened to a dog or regarded as a spectacle of weakness?

St. Augustine said that pride changes angels into devils and Satan uses pride as a favorite device for separating us from God and God's help.

But the woman's attitude in the face of her rejection and what might Jesus' refusal remains unshaken.

The woman remains humble before Jesus as she continues to make her argument. She remains at Jesus' feet.

She places herself in a position that makes it possible to receive. She acknowledges her standing as a Gentile dog and yet persists in her humility.

St. Bernard of Clairvaux said:

“it is only when humility warrants it that great graces can be obtained...And so when you perceive that you are being humiliated look on it as a sign of a sure guarantee that grace is on the way. Just as the heart is puffed up with pride before its destruction, so it is humiliated before being honored...It is the possession of a joyful and genuine humility that alone enables us to receive grace.”

The humble woman in our story does not abase herself so that she becomes a doormat. And yet she aggressively seeks help in her humility and will not turn away.

What this story reveals is Jesus' true nature and character of compassion and mercy, and that Jesus knows your troubles, fears, pain, loneliness, your suffering because He was human and lived in this world.

This story reveals that receiving God's grace may require the evidence of your humility—not for it to be given, but for you to be prepared to truly receive it.

In the end, just like the woman in our story, you don't just get the crumbs that fall from the table, but the entire banquet!