

**Mark 7:24-30**  
**A Woman Tells Jesus What's Up**  
**Rev. Kelley L. Becker**

Have you ever just gotten it wrong? One of the things I fear most about preaching and writing for the public sphere is that I will get something horribly wrong and either draw attention to my ignorance, or worse, hurt someone. I've said it before, words matter. Recently, there was a story in the newspaper about a leader of a church in the area who performed a song in Black face makeup. When attention was called to that video another picture surfaced of the same leader dressed up as an Indigenous woman with another person dressed as a cowboy holding a gun to the Indigenous woman's head. Actions matter.

This man's actions are inexcusable, but especially so because he is in a position of power and leadership. When asked about his actions, he has, even now, been unable to take responsibility or to even acknowledge that his actions were hurtful and racist. He was interviewed about the "cowboy and Indian" picture and he referred to his own costume as that of a squaw, which is a term considered universally offensive to Indigenous people in the U.S. and Canada. Again, words matter.

Today's text is a story about an encounter between Jesus and a woman who was not Jewish. The word for that is Gentile. The fact that she was a Gentile made her "the other" to the Jewish people in Jesus' day. And knowing Jesus like we do, we would expect his words and actions to be a reflection of God, right? Is it possible that sometimes even Jesus got it wrong?

This is Mark 7:24-30:

<sup>24</sup> 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, <sup>25</sup> but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. <sup>26</sup> Now the woman was a gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. <sup>27</sup> 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." <sup>28</sup> But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." <sup>29</sup> Then he said to her,

“For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.”<sup>30</sup> And when she went home, she found the child lying on the bed and the demon gone.

The first thing for us to know is that scholars think this story is rooted in the Jewish wisdom tradition and was tweaked by the gospel authors to be used as part of Jesus’ story. A version of it is used in both the Gospel of Mark and the Gospel of Matthew. The Gospel of Mark was written first, so the story in Matthew was likely taken from Mark. If you are shocked at Jesus’ behavior in this story, the good news is, based on what we know about what Jesus really said and did, he would not have said the things attributed to him in this story. Jesus himself did not claim he had been assigned a specific mission, for only some people. But, nevertheless, the story is here, and it has something to teach us.

The author of Mark’s Jesus had been busy. He had been going from place to place in Galilee, healing, teaching, and explaining himself to some of the religious leaders. The beginning of this story makes it sound like Jesus went to Tyre to get away from it all for a bit. Little did he know, word of him had spread. The mention of Tyre and the woman identified as Syrophenician tell us that Jesus was traversing Gentile territory, a land and people looked down on, even despised, by the Jewish people. You see, racism and xenophobia have been around for a long time and no group of people is immune from getting it wrong.

The woman who approached Jesus broke through every traditional barrier that should have prevented her from doing so. She was a Gentile, which made her “impure” according to Jewish tradition. She was also a woman, unaccompanied by a husband or another male relative, *and* she initiated a conversation with a strange man. The woman started with three strikes against her. But that isn’t all. Her daughter was possessed by a demon. The text doesn’t tell us how that “demon” affected her daughter, but based on other stories, we can guess that it caused her to behave in bizarre ways that would have resulted in social isolation.

Having the benefit of science, we can surmise the daughter was not demon-possessed, but mentally ill. We know that people who are ill, regardless of the illness, need medical care, compassion, and support. But, in the ancient world people generally believed a person who was “demon-possessed,” had done something wrong which invited the demon in. So, the daughter’s condition was

not met with kindness, it was met with fear. The woman and her daughter were as outsider-y as they could be.

And the woman knew this. She knew she was taking a huge risk by asking this strange man for anything. But how many of us, faced with a child's or any loved one's serious illness, would risk it all if we thought we could get them the help they needed, even if it was a long shot? As shocking as Jesus' response to the woman was, she had probably already braced herself for it.

He was harsh, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." The "children" would be the people of Israel, Jewish people. The "dogs" were the Gentiles.

Over the years, Christians who mistakenly insist the Bible is the inerrant word of God and that God would never want Jesus presented in a negative light have tried to clean this story up a little. Jesus must have acted a fool because he was trying to coax the woman into an affirmation of faith. Or Jesus was exhausted and needed to rest and we all say mean things when we get tired. And the funniest explanation I've heard, he wasn't insulting the woman by calling her a dog. He meant she was cute, like a sweet little puppy, like that sweet dog on the screen right now. All those excuses are ridiculous and completely without merit.

The author wanted his readers to hear Jesus say those words. While, in other places in the Gospel of Mark, we read that the author believed Gentiles should be included in the Jesus movement, the truth was, in these early Christian communities formed after Jesus' death, the place of Gentiles was still very much open for debate. The extent to which Gentiles should be included was not a settled issue. Sound familiar? This kind of thing is still happening today in churches. Right now, the United Methodist Church is being torn apart because they can't agree to what extent people in the LGBTQ+ community will be included.

The woman was ready for Jesus' nonsense though.

Without missing a beat, she said, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Basically, say what you want, but this healing, if it is from God, is for everyone." That's my paraphrase. This woman was amazing. She was courageous. She was smart. And she clearly loved her child fiercely. There was probably a part of her that wondered what *she* had done to invite that demon

into her daughter. I can't imagine it was easy for her not to challenge what this strange man said about her and her people. Instead of defending her culture against his disrespectful, xenophobic metaphor, she used his own metaphor to get what she needed. She shouldn't have had to swallow the rage inside her. But she did, for the benefit of her daughter.

Women have been doing that for a very long time. We have ignored and laughed off inappropriate comments in the workplace, at parties, and even from strangers walking down the street. We've done so, not because those comments weren't hurtful and demeaning, but because challenging them wasn't worth the risk. We've wanted to keep our jobs. We didn't want to embarrass the host of the party or risk our own safety by publicly calling it out. The same is true for people of color, the LGBTQ+ community, children, senior citizens, people who are differently abled. When one person has power over another person, the person without the power must weigh their response to the aggression very carefully. This woman wanted her daughter healed more than she wanted to debate her own humanity. Love does that.

When I was a single mom working as a youth minister, one of the parents of a young person in my youth group was very inappropriate with me regularly. One of my kids saw it once and was disgusted, as was I every time it happened. But I was a single mom, and I needed my job. The other person had money and power. I feared the church needed him more than it needed me. So, I pretended it was not a big deal. Older, more experienced, Kelley would probably have handled that differently.

We are, after all, a work in progress. I chose this story today for two reasons. First, today is a day we celebrate women and I think this story is a great story for that. And second, as we say good-bye to the Riveras, I am very aware that one of the gifts both Alex and Callie have given this congregation is their willingness to share their own stories of trauma which have included moments in their lives that looked a lot like the moment this brave woman experienced when she encountered Jesus. That was not in either of their job descriptions, but it is one of the things we will miss when they leave.

The courage Callie has shown us as she has faced her own chronic illness and the ways in which she has fought the broken healthcare system, not only for herself, but for her children, is inspiring and has highlighted the ableism, racism, and

brokenness present in the very system that should be bringing about healing and wholeness.

And Alex, your work teaching music educators, and others about the damage microaggressions cause to young people, to all people, is something we have all been so proud of. Your work as an educator has also been the work in which this congregation finds its purpose, bringing wholeness to a fragmented world. It is important for me to say publicly, "Thank you for telling me when I was wrong, for expending emotional energy helping me understand, for your courage in speaking truth to your boss, and for seeing past my blunders to my intentions. I have been changed and I am grateful.

Today's text ends with Jesus acknowledging the woman's point and healing her child from afar. In a world in which women were marginalized and their stories left untold, this gospel author wrote a story in which a woman is portrayed as strong, smart, and courageous, in which Jesus acted like a jerk, made a mistake, acknowledged it and changed his mind, unlike the "pastor" in our own community who continues to double down on his actions, even though Black people and Indigenous people have publicly said what he did was hurtful and disrespectful. As a result of Jesus listening to this devoted mom, a new life began for her daughter, a life in which she will not be isolated from community, she is made whole.

It's incredible this story made it past the many male scribes and editors to our Bibles today. We can learn a lot from it. What stands out to me is that we need to listen to the voices of women and the other ones who are marginalized, believe their experiences, commit to learning from them, and allow ourselves to be changed, so that the world will be changed. Dear ones, we have so much to learn from each other. We have so much to learn from voices that have been silenced. And sometimes what we hear from them and learn from them is hard to hear, but we are not alone, we do not do this work in ourselves and the world alone. We are in this together, even when some of us move away. Amen.