

September 8, 2024

“Scraps From the Table”

Mark 7:24-30

Intro:

It is often stated that the Gospel, and perhaps all of Scripture, if we really want to get right down to it, is offensive. However, we don't often think to equate the offensiveness directly with Jesus himself. No, we would prefer to think of him as always being gentle and kind with his words, patient with those in need. He only ever spoke firmly to those who deserved such treatment, such as the Pharisees and Sadducees who were trying to undermine his ministry and lead people away from the saving grace of God.

Well, this morning we should be prepared for some unexpected offensiveness from Jesus. If you are a woman, a gentile, or a dog lover... you might possibly be offended by the encounter with Jesus in Mark 7 that we are looking at. If you are none of those things, it is alright if you find yourself being offended on their behalf.

Let's begin.

The Narrative:

The beauty of a small town is that you can have a nice quiet and private life – which of course means that everyone knows what you are up to the minute you are doing it. Jesus and the disciples have left Galilee and, having traveled to the region of the city of Tyr, have stopped at an out of the way Airbnb in hopes that they won't be bothered by anyone. Perhaps Jesus is looking for a little rest, or some private small group teaching moments with the disciples – there is much they still need to learn, after all, or maybe he just likes being out in the sticks. Whatever the reason, there they are, in a hopefully private home in the vicinity of Tyr.

Tyr, it should be stated at this point, is a center-point for pagan religion and worship. They are a domineering people, hoarding food from the surrounding countryside, while those providing the food starve. They are a people who have historically opposed the Jewish people, siding against them on several occasions throughout history. This is a city is about as far from a godly place as one could find, and as a city-state, their influence extends into the wider region. This is where Jesus is staying.

Jesus' arrival is meant to be kept secret, as is the place where he is staying, and so naturally, everyone knows about it and people flock to him for healing and teaching – his reputation for such matters having proceeded him.

It is a calm morning, the sun just climbing over the horizon. Perhaps there is just enough breeze to cool the face and bring the fresh scent of dew on the grass. A perfect morning for a nice cup of coffee on the deck, maybe to catch up on a little reading. Rest is what was needed. No sooner has Jesus settled into the comfy chair, and had his first sip of that coffee, than he sees dust on the road leading up the lane. It seems that people have figured out where he is and there will soon be a crowd for him to deal with. It is a bit vexing, but he has pity and love for those people and so he sets his paper down, sips some more coffee and prepares for the lessons that are to come. As the crowd draws closer, one person can be seen to be frantically pushing through and to the front. Seeing the way clear to Jesus, she (Jesus can see it is a woman now) rushes forward and falls at his feet. Her words come in short fits as she struggles to catch her breath. But more than that, she is struggling to keep her composure. Surely there is something desperate going on in her life for her to give such a display of earnestness and desperation.

“Teacher” she says, “My daughter is being possessed by an evil spirit and there is no other help for her, except that you would drive it out.” She looks up at his face uncertain of what response she will get.

Jesus looks at the woman. This is a person who should not be here. Yes, she should be in the region – she is from Syrian Phoenicia, which is part of Tyr, but she

should not be right there in front of Jesus. Jesus does not represent the religion that she follows. She represents a people and culture who have been in opposition to Jewish people. That would be bad enough, but she is also a woman and to boldly present herself like this with no other man nearby to vouch for her is a great breach of social etiquette.

“First I should feed the children - my own family, the Jews. It isn’t right to take food from the children and throw it to the dogs.”

Jesus speaks the words in answer to her plea, but he speaks them above her head, above the station that she should occupy in society.

Here we pause the narrative. Are you offended yet? Are you a little bit outraged that Jesus would respond in such a way to this request? He has just said to this woman that she is no better than a dog and a dog does not deserve to get the same level or quality of food (or care) as those who are worthy – in this case the Jewish people. In Jewish culture, dogs, especially those that lived outside on the streets, were considered to be lowly creatures and unclean. Women and dogs were on the same level. Actually, the NLT translates this statement of Jesus in a much nicer way than other versions do. For example, the NIV puts it: “First let the children eat all they want... for it is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.” This is really an offensive moment, and not one that we are used to hearing from Jesus. In Matthew’s account of this encounter, he notes that Jesus ignores the woman at the beginning and only after she pesters him a bit does he respond.

But let’s return to the narrative unfolding...

A gasp, a small one, escapes from the throats of a few of the people standing nearby. This is not what they expected. Certainly this woman has a lot nerve to think that she could make demands of Jesus, but Jesus’ reputation is that he welcomes such pleas. Where is the kindness that he is known for? Even Levi is surprised not only by the bold presence of this woman, but by Jesus’ response.

The woman is not to be put off. She is not just going to retreat back into a corner – beaten by things she can not control. She hesitates only for a moment before responding to Jesus’ words. She knows her place. She knows her history. She knows the significance of what she is doing and asking, and all of that falls short when compared to her love for her daughter and her desperation to see her well and whole. She raises her eyes to Jesus’ face, finds in his eyes some glimmer of permission, and taking hold of it replies, “That’s true, Lord, but even the dogs under the table are allowed to eat the scraps from the children’s plates.”

You could have heard a pin drop, which is something because the ground is dirt and not a hard surface. A stillness, as though every person there is holding their breath, waiting for the blow of rejection for the audacity of this woman to so challenge the teacher. After what seems an eternity, but was likely only mere moments, Jesus turns his face to this desperate woman, smiles, commends her answer, and informs her that her daughter is now free from the demon.

Explaining the Story:

This is not an easy gospel story for us to deal with. It doesn’t fit. Yes, Jesus does deliver the young girl from demon possession, but the whole dialogue beforehand puzzles us. Why does Jesus respond the way he does? What is it about the woman’s response that satisfies what Jesus was looking for? There is much written and speculated about the meaning of this encounter, but I will suggest just one for us to take home this morning.

The woman understands Jesus’ mission.

This woman, who is not Jewish or knowledgeable about the Messiah and God’s promises for redemption, nonetheless understands more about the mission of Jesus than did most Jews – including the disciples. Jesus poses to her a riddle about children’s bread and dogs, and she gets the meaning. Jesus often used riddles and parables to teach, and more often than not they were not understood. This is the first time in Mark’s gospel that anyone understands one of Jesus’ parables. Just a few verses earlier in the chapter, Jesus tells a parable about

food and not even his disciples, who have been travelling with and learning from him, understand the meaning.

But this woman gets it. She hears the words that Jesus is speaking and knows how they apply. She notices that Jesus uses a word for dog that does not mean the sketchy street mutts, but rather a smaller dog that would have been kept inside as a pet, probably for the children. This is not an identification of worthlessness, but a comparison for inclusion. Just as the small dog is included in the family, so is this gentile woman. It is this that gives her the courage to speak out about scraps.

Jesus' mission was first to the Jews. He makes that clear, and Paul makes that clear, but the Messiah didn't come only for a select few. God's love does not flow out to just a select group of people. Jesus came for all to have hope and forgiveness. Yes, it started with the Jews, but it was never to end with them. Peter comes to understand this when he has the vision of God telling him to eat various unclean foods before he goes to eat at the gentile Cornelius' house (Acts 10). Paul has this branded onto his very soul in his encounter with Jesus (Acts 9:15).

So at the table of God there is food – the good grace of God, and it is given to the children, the Jews. But the gentiles are there as well: the little dogs sitting under the table waiting for their share. The children will eat, and they will drop food as they do so. Not pity morsels, but equal food. The dogs will eat at the same time as the children do. It might seem like scraps, but it isn't. But even it were, this woman has understood one other thing about this dispensed grace of God. It is not gained through pride and position. It is gained through humility. Faith is about humbling ourselves to the will of God. To acknowledge that we don't have all the answers, that we can't cancel our debts, that we are in fact not God. This woman comprehended all of that, and it showed in her answer.

And Jesus smiled upon her, and as Matthew puts it (Matthew 15:21-28), he said to her, "Dear woman, your faith is great."

Let's pray.