

Did He Really Say That?

September 30, 2012

Mark 7:24-30

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, but 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 Syrophenician 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.

I caught the tail end of a program on the history channel the other day. It was a travel show on southern Alberta, Canada, and the Blackfoot Nation. What little I saw made me wish that I had seen the whole show. It also made me appreciate how much you can learn when you venture into other lands. The host ended the show with this quote by Mark Twain: *"Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime."* Whether you call it expanding your horizons or stepping out of your comfort zone, entering someone else's world can be challenging to your preconceived ideas.

Jesus discovered this when he traveled to the region of Tyre. Tyre was a wealthy Roman port city on the Mediterranean Sea and kind of place you might visit to get away from it all. Jesus enters a house and does not want anyone to know he is there. That sounds like a vacation to me. But his vacation is interrupted by one more person falling at his feet – begging him – pleading with him to heal her daughter.

We don't know her name but we know enough to recognize two strikes against her... she is a woman... she is a Gentile. She is also desperate to save the life of her daughter – willing to risk shame, humiliation, rejection, anything, to save her daughter. Somehow she heard about Jesus, a peasant Jewish prophet from Galilee who was known for healings and miracles. Willing to try anything she hunted him down, invaded his privacy, disrupted his peace, fell at his feet and poured out her heart.

For the last month we have prayed for a little baby named Celia, born with a condition that left doctors wondering if she could survive. We could feel the anxiety and pain of her parents and family through each blog post and e-mail. Losing a child, even the thought of losing a child, is emotionally devastating. So when we read that this mother had a little girl who was suffering we can appreciate her audacity. She will not rest until her daughter is well. What has she got to lose busting in on Jesus' vacation?

So she falls at his feet and begs him to cast out this demon of illness that is consuming her little girl. We've been following Jesus around for a while now so we kind of assume this story will play out like the others. We assume Jesus will have compassion, heal her daughter, and make

her an example of faith. So when Jesus fails to have compassion we are shocked. When he denies her request because she isn't a Jew we can't believe it. When he calls her a dog we want to believe he didn't mean it. What happens is that Jesus tells her *"Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."*

In case you need that saying unpacked – the children are the Jews and the Gentiles are the dogs. She is a dog. He didn't come for her. His gifts are not for her. She is an outsider, in every way and Jesus tells her as much.

It is interesting to read different people trying to grapple with this text. Some people refuse to believe that Jesus could have been so harsh and dismissive. They try to wrangle with the word "dog" and make it something cute and sweet like little puppies. Or they try to tell us that Jesus is taking on the attitudes of the Jews around him and somehow teaching them a lesson. No one seems to want to believe that a Gentile woman got Jesus to change his mind, and not just about her, but his mission to all Gentiles.

And how did she do it – according to the story it wasn't her faith – it was her logic – her reasoning. She delivered the perfect comeback. Jesus had just fed the 5,000 and there was an abundance of food left over. How could he possibly be stingy now? She said, *"Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."*

She didn't react to being called a dog. She responded respectfully turning Jesus' own words on end. All she wanted was a crumb, a crumb of healing, a crumb of hope, a crumb from the overflowing table of God's abundance. She didn't need a place at the table, she was content with crumbs. How could Jesus deny her?

"For saying that," he said, *"you may go – the demon has left your daughter."* She goes home to find her daughter set free from the demon. Jesus goes on with a change of heart about his mission and ministry. He goes on to heal a deaf and dumb man, presumably a Gentile, and he goes on to feed 4,000 presumed Gentiles. A line is erased for Jesus, the line that divides Jews from Gentiles and it marks a turning point for Jesus.

This scripture is radical – it portrays a gentile woman as a teacher – and it portrays Jesus as teachable. Jesus is able to be responsive to a gentile, even when the law and his tradition tells him "no way!"

In traveling to Tyre Jesus proved true the words of Twain – his vision broadened.

If Jesus, the Son of God, could be persuaded by an outsider to change his way of thinking what is our problem? Why are we so quick to draw lines? Why do we think we have the right to decide who is in and who is out? Tell me – who is beyond the reach of God's mercy?

If we are to take seriously our call to compassion then we must also take seriously the need to listen to others – to hear their stories – to learn – to travel to places unknown, even if just down the street.

What Twain recognized all those years ago – leadership coaches and inspirational speakers are spouting now – replace judgment with curiosity. This is how we become compassionate.

Several years ago I was part of an ecumenical group that was working on a resource guide for welcoming new Iowans. As part of our research we traveled to Perry and met with a community liaison for IBP and with a group of immigrant laborers from the plant. I was horrified by my own ignorance. They told their stories one by one. There is nothing easy about picking up your family and moving to a place where you are treated worse than the pigs you are slaughtering. These workers are no different from you and I, they love their children and want desperately to give them a life. But according to one unnamed member of my husband's family – its fine with her if their kids die...they shouldn't have access to OUR healthcare or an education.

The Syrophoenician woman gets in our face and challenges our values. If you say you are a Christian – where is your compassion? Are you at least willing to listen? Are you willing to grow? Or have you folded your arms and made up your mind?

I love that in the very next story Jesus heals a deaf man with a speech impediment with the words, “BE OPENED!” Perhaps that is the healing we all need when we are deaf to the way of compassion and our speech is impeded by prejudice and ignorance. Be opened!

Open your hearts
Open your eyes
Open your ears
Open your arms
Open your mind
Open your vision

BE OPENED! It's how we grow.