

Steve Jungkeit  
 The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme  
 Text: Mark 7: 24-30  
 May 15, 2022

### In the Midst of New Dimensions: The Time That Jesus Was Corrected<sup>1</sup>

It's a troubling, and maybe confusing story that we just heard. We tend to imagine that Jesus was all sweetness and light, one who welcomed everyone around him. We think of him as the friend who is always just a phone call away, the person always ready to drop everything to serve the needs of those around him. And yet, the Syrophonecian woman from the story finds Jesus to be indifferent to her needs. He tries to brush her off. Jesus's indifference leads her to push harder. That's when things get kind of ugly. Jesus calls her a dog. Not only that, it's clear that the insult is meant not only for the woman, but for her entire people as well. "Let the children be fed first," Jesus says, "for it is not fair to take the children's food and feed it to the dogs." Yikes. There are more than a few passages in the Bible that we wish weren't there, but we tend to believe that at least in the Gospels, we're in safe territory. But there it is. How are we to understand that exchange? What are we to do with it?

We might just say that Jesus was having a bad day. Indeed, if you look at the preceding verses in Mark's gospel, you might be led to that very conclusion. Jesus is having a hard time with his disciples. Over and over again, they fail to understand what Jesus is about, what he's doing with people, and it's clear that Jesus is frustrated. But it's also clear that the religious leaders are beginning to kick up resistance around him as well. They operated in a way that should be familiar to us all today, playing games of "gotcha" around every word that fell from Jesus's lips, waiting to catch him in a slip of the tongue that they can use to criticize him. Jesus became exasperated with them over their purity codes, their nitpicking, and their pedantry, leading to a testy exchange in which Jesus called them hypocrites.

So we can imagine why Jesus wanted to get away. But the way he does so is unusual. He goes to the region of Tyre, outside of Israel, in Gentile territory. It was, in other words, the crossing of a social and cultural wall, like an Israeli crossing the wall and going to Palestine, or vice versa, or like someone from Ukraine venturing into Russia. Except under controlled conditions, it doesn't often happen. But Jesus goes there, I suspect, because he thinks he's less likely to be imposed upon.

That's what Mark leads us to believe, at any rate. "He entered a house, and did not want anyone to know that he was there." No doubt we can all appreciate that feeling at some level. What mother among us hasn't hidden in the bedroom for just a while, so as not to be noticed, and thereafter asked to do something? Who among us doesn't need to be freed, even for a short time, from the pressures and strains of our ordinary responsibilities? Speaking for myself, I can say that as much as I love my work here, and as much as I love all of you, I'm grateful for those moments I can slip away, as I did last weekend, to relax a little bit, to gain some perspective, and to feel renewed and a little more inspired as a result. If Jesus needed it, then it's probable that each of us does as well.

It's not long before the knock comes on the door. The woman wants and needs Jesus's time and attention, and we can imagine that Jesus looked upon her as an unwanted intruder in

---

<sup>1</sup> Some of the insights gathered here are drawn from a mentor, Gene Bay, in a sermon entitled "The Time That Jesus Lost an Argument," from September 10, 2000. From the self-published book *A Sower Went Out*.

that moment, one who might alert others to his presence. But there's more still. The woman was a Gentile. Jesus was a Jew. The social norm was that Jews and Gentiles did not mix. To top it all off, this was a patriarchal society, with strict rules governing the interactions of women and men. For a Gentile woman to come to Jesus with a demand would have amounted to an affront.

That's how Jesus treats the woman, at least initially: as an affront. But in the version of the story found in Matthew's gospel, we get another clue as to what was bothering Jesus about the interaction. "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel," Jesus says. "What am I here for?" Jesus seems to be saying. "Who have I come to serve?" What church, what business, what school, what non-profit, has not been forced to think about that question so as not to spread itself too thin - what is it that *we* are here to do? We can't do everything well, and so what is our purpose, what is our calling, what is our mission? It's an important set of questions, and Jesus seems to be putting parameters around his own mission. In other words, "I must take care of my own people first. It's not right to take my children's food and to throw it to the dogs."

One of the things I love about this story is that the woman doesn't take no for an answer. She stands firm - against Jesus, against those patriarchal norms, against everything. She does so because she has a daughter who needs healing. But I also love that she doesn't enter into a direct argument with Jesus. She doesn't challenge him to redirect his priorities or to check his head. She uses one of the so-called "weapons of the weak." She uses her wits, entering into a play of words with Jesus. "Ah yes," comes the woman's reply: "But even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

Somehow, it is wit, and a playful but tenacious spirit that cuts through Jesus's indifference. And isn't that a familiar dynamic of the story as well? So often, when we press a point in an argument we attempt a full throated attack. That has its place, I suppose, but the Syrophencian woman, there on her daughter's behalf, reminds us that there are other ways of getting what we need. Sometimes, even when the cause is deadly serious, as it was for the woman, the best way forward is through the use of our words, our wit, our play. It gets through to Jesus. He gives her what she needs, and more. "For saying that," he says, "you may go. The demon has left your daughter."

That's the story, about how Jesus was corrected by the Syrophencian woman. It remains to ask what we are to make of the story, and how, specifically, it applies to us. This is the moment in which I wish to persuade you that this story is pivotal, both for Jesus and for us. As I've pondered it this week, two particular lessons emerge, though I'm sure there are others.

Here's the first. The Syrophencian woman is relentless and persistent about what she wants and needs. Nothing, it seems, will stand in her way as she pursues the well being of her daughter. You have to wonder if one of the reasons Jesus responded as he did was not only because he admired her tenacity, but wished his own disciples exhibited the same kind of spirit. She must have seemed like a welcome change compared to the cluelessness of the disciples, on one hand, and the pettiffoggery of the religious authorities on the other.

Might it be that we could use a little more of that same spirit? Might it be that we could also use some of that same relentlessness and persistence as we pursue what we want and need? I don't mean money or things - most of us have plenty of that already. I'm talking about a sense of well-being in our relationships. I'm talking about a deeper and more mature faith. I'm talking about a greater awareness of God, of the sacred, in our lives and in our world. I'm talking about a more balanced relationship with the natural world. I'm talking about the ways in which we instill a sense of faith, hope, and love in our children. Most of us say we want those things, but how many of us are willing to go to the lengths the Syrophencian woman went to get them?

There's another insight that follows from her persistence. For those of us who are disturbed by the erosion of democracy, the rollback of civil rights in the United States, and the probable repeal of *Roe v. Wade*, the Syrophonecian woman can serve as a model. She confronts patriarchy on behalf of her daughter. The rollback of civil rights, especially regarding abortion, is an assertion of a narrow and self-serving patriarchal power, and they will all require persistence and perseverance if they are to be resisted. I well know that there are likely to be a range of thoughts and feelings about abortion within any church community, and I am sure this is not an exception. But surely, even if you find the act itself painful to comprehend, the solution is not to create a nightmare dystopia of secrets, shame, accusation, fear, medical disasters and ruined lives for women with unwanted or unplanned pregnancies. Surely, if you have strong moral convictions against abortion, the solution lies along the path of persuasion rather than through repressive legislation. Like the woman pursuing healing for her daughter, we too shall have to use our doggedness, if you will, on behalf of our daughters and granddaughters. We too shall have to use our wits and our words in the days and months, and maybe years, that lie before us. We may need all sorts of tactics at our disposal, but the woman reminds us that we're at our best not when we demonize others, not when we're busy shaming or calling people out for this or that failure of imagination, but when we're using our wits, our words, and our persuasive powers to widen, rather than curtailing, a social vision.

Now for the second insight. This one is derived less from the woman, and more from Jesus himself. I appreciate this story about Jesus because it hints at his own growth as a human being. It hints that even he was in process, and that new insights and challenges could provoke new directions in his ministry. The encounter with the Syrophonecian woman seems to have been the pivotal moment that convinced Jesus to widen his ministry, to push forward into new dimensions. After being corrected, he goes deeper into Gentile territory, healing people, and feeding the multitudes. It's a moment that can help churches to understand that sometimes, it's necessary to expand our vision, to change direction, or to explore a new set of possibilities.

I mention this second lesson from the story of Jesus and the Syrophonecian woman because I sense a similar opportunity for us. When I arrived in Old Lyme nine years ago, it was, at least in part, your commitment to local and global partnerships that caught my attention. No church, that I knew of anyway, affirmed their own Christian commitments while simultaneously supporting and exploring Native American spirituality, or Islam, or Judaism. No church, that I knew of anyway, was as serious as this one when it came to brokering lasting relationships between groups and cultures that haven't been on close terms - New England Congregationalists and Haitian, or Palestinian, villagers, say. Among many strengths and marks of distinction, your - our! - commitment to building cultures of reciprocity, trust, and mutual aid between those who ordinarily wouldn't risk knowing one another stands paramount. Each of our partnerships remains vital to our work and our identity as a community, but over the past several years, as Covid has slowed us down, and as I have been allowed to grow in your company, I have been wondering if it is time to explore something new. I have been wondering if we need to explore the cultures, traditions, and peoples of West Africa and its diaspora with greater concentration. I have several reasons for saying so.

First, as our *Stories from the Deep North* series disclosed last year, more than two hundred people who resided in West Africa, or whose parents or grandparents resided there, wound up living here, in Lyme and Old Lyme. In one form or another, those traditions and practices existed here. Second, this community was originally shaped not by a two way exchange between Britain and the colonies, or between Europe and the colonies. It was shaped by an

Atlantic circuit that included Europe, but that also included Africa, and the Caribbean. There was constant traffic between the Lieutenant and Connecticut Rivers down to places like Barbados and Jamaica, but also Cuba, Haiti, Guadeloupe, and other parts of the Caribbean, which were themselves intimately connected to West Africa. We can't understand ourselves until we understand the depth of that history. Third, a cosmopolitan and well educated Christian congregation does well to understand a little something about other faiths - Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and the like. But there are other, ancient faith practices that have surrounded us for centuries, practiced by people of West African descent. And yet few of us, including myself for far too long, have bothered to learn anything about those faith practices. Why would we not? Fourth, it happens that many of those faith practices derived from West Africa have been persecuted for centuries, but the hostility has increased dramatically in recent years. In Brazil, in Haiti, in the US, and in places like Nigeria and Congo, Protestant Christians have unleashed campaigns of terror and intimidation that have led to vandalism, and worse. What would it mean for Protestants with a different understanding of faith to reach out in a gesture of respect and reverence for those traditions, rather than violence and fear? Fifth, we in the United States have a tendency to focus exclusively upon the horrors of the slave trade and what was wrought by that demonic practice. We need to learn all we can about that. But we also need to learn about the dynamism and beauty that sheltered untold millions of human lives in that awful reality, a dynamism and beauty that continues to live today. But finally, I believe these traditions and practices allow us to sense the original vision of Christian faith. We must not forget that before Christianity became the language of empire, it was a tiny minority practiced in the shadows of empire, sheltering those who were attempting to preserve their own best humanity within inhuman conditions. If you want to know what early Christianity was like, you might need to look not to the origins of Protestantism, or the Roman Catholic church, but rather to something like Haitian Vodou, or Yoruba Orisha worship. The form and expression might differ. But the underlying vision is far closer to the experience of the first Christians than most of what passes for Christian faith today.

In the coming weeks - from the pulpit and in the newsletter - I'll share a little more about what we might accomplish together on such a venture. For now, though, I merely wish to signal the direction in which I have been heading, and to ask you to remain open to a new dimension of our life together. If it all feels extraneous to the daily obligations and struggles that you're tasked with, and if you can't imagine processing more, well, I don't blame you. Even Jesus responded that way, at least once. This is a big place, and if this isn't your thing, I want you to know that we'll love you - I'll love you - all the same. But, at least for me, a knock has come on my door, and a direction I hadn't imagined some years ago has suggested itself. Might it be time to learn, in faith, where it's all leading?

In the faith of a persistent mother, Jesus had the courage to enlarge his vision. May we learn well the lessons embedded in their provocative, and life altering, exchange, leading us into new dimensions of our life together.