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A Place at the Table

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The account of the Syrophoenician woman is a difficult one, because in this story we see Jesus being downright unlikable.

The story itself is part of a larger collection of narratives from Mark 6.30 to Mark 8.21 that are blended and connected to each other, linked by the image of bread and the new way of inclusion for all. This collection contains a variety of stories, sandwiched between two miraculous feedings. Jesus heals the sick and cures a deaf man, he walks on water and he wins an argument with some Pharisees and scribes. *This* is the Jesus we know and love: generous, wise, powerful and godly. But not so with the Syrophoenician woman. Here his character is quite the opposite. And yet, the change that occurs after his encounter with the woman proves the story's pivotal place in the advancement of the kingdom, whether we are completely enamored with the Jesus found within it or not.

The passage opens by recounting Jesus' move into Tyre and his sequestering himself away into a house, hiding from the people. It is notable that Tyre is Gentile territory. Jesus is all about crossing boundaries, and here he does so quite literally. Being a coastal city, it may be that Jesus goes to Tyre for a sort of vacation or retreat. And so he did: upon arriving, Jesus hid. This happens often enough in Mark's Gospel. Scholars talk about the "Messianic Secret," where Jesus is hesitant to divulge where he is or who he is, as the positive and negative fervor about him grows. In this case, however, it may just be an attempt to have some peace and quiet: time to pray, think, regroup.

It is this trying-to-hide Jesus that the Syrophoenician woman seeks out and finds. Mark, in true story-telling fashion, gives us the action first and the details about her a verse later. She is a Syrophoenician, Greek in both religion and culture. (Syrophoenician simply refers to the fact that she was a Phoenician from Syria instead of Libya.) She is a woman, a Greek, and she is desperate, based on her audacity in walking unaccompanied into the house where Jesus is in order to make her request. But upon entering boldly, this woman bows down humbly, the same action taken previously in the Gospel by the leper, the Gerasene demoniac and the synagogue leader Jairus. All of them recognized Jesus' abilities, just like this woman. Then the woman, upon showing Jesus homage, makes her request.

That's where it happens. A mother in desperation asks for help, and Jesus snubs her, not simply saying no, but insulting her in the process.

I can imagine Jewish Christians in the early church listening to Mark's Gospel at this moment in the story as it was read aloud. Some of the earlier parts revolutionized what the religious authorities held in high esteem and turned tradition on its head: there was a new sense of family, a new understanding of ritual purity. I think perhaps the Jewish believers in the crowd might have felt somewhat under attack as Jesus brought new definition to their laws and customs. If they were truly to believe in Jesus, their way of life was to be altered significantly. I can see them squirming until the story of this woman: a Gentile asks for help and Jesus' retort puts her in her place. A collective sigh of relief is breathed. Yes! Jesus held to the establishment of this new kingdom in principle, but thankfully not in practice.

And from the outset, that is what it would seem. The verb Jesus uses for giving food to the children is *chortasthenai*: to have their fill. It is not for them simply to be fed (*esthio*), but rather, to be satisfied. Mark's word choice here is deliberate. This is the word that describes the extent to which the five thousand ate in the feeding narrative at the beginning of the section, and this same "eating to the full" will occur again in the feeding of the four thousand at the end. The food that is to satisfy the children is in fact the word for bread, the same word that appears seventeen times in this cluster of stories. As a staple of the diet, "bread" could be used interchangeably with "food," but to the listener of Mark's Gospel, it was this concept of bread that tied all of these narratives together, bread that signified the new life that Jesus offered, a life of freedom from sin and oppression. However, when the Syrophoenician woman asks for help, Jesus makes it clear that this bread is not for her. His message, his ministry, his miracles were reserved for the Jews. And then, as if to add insult to injury, Jesus reminds the woman of her unworthiness by calling her a dog. Many have taken pains to point out to the reader that Jesus uses a diminutive, calling her a "doggie" rather than a dog, as if somehow to soften the blow. It doesn't really matter. His point is clear: this woman is like the scavenging dogs in the street. Rabbis would use the word to imply that a person was ungodly or unlearned in scripture. As such, it was for this woman an appropriate moniker, no matter how rude: she was yet another predator for the rightful Jewish inheritors to manage.

Hearing Jesus' response to the woman in this story, there are bound to be those who ask, "Is this really the physical incarnation of my God?" For many of us here today—and, perhaps, for even more of us who aren't here—we know the answer to be "yes." We have prayed, wept and pleaded with God, only to hear God's "no." And when our minds are filled with desperation, our ears hear God's denial as if spoken with derision.

Like this woman, the majority of us fit into some minority, some way of being marginalized or alienated: by race, gender, sexual orientation, social economic status, or events that have affected us for the worse, such as abuse, death of a loved one, mental illness, or physical handicaps, impairments and sickness. Bad things continue to happen, and still some of our cries to God bring nothing but silence or even a "no," and we crumble.

But as for this woman, when Jesus slights her, she does not crumble. She does not argue. She does not insist on her rights. On the contrary, she addresses Jesus with respect, calling him "Lord," being, in fact, the only person in the entire Gospel to do so directly. She takes on the degradation that he places on her, acknowledging that she is, indeed, no better than a dog. But she does not stop there: the woman's wit challenges Jesus to rethink his refusal. She will consent to being a dog, as he has declared, but she figures herself into a domesticated dog, one that would have access to the part of the home where the family eats. And if the children are to eat first, that too seems to fit into her scheme, as the children of Israel were already receiving part in the banquet—they had been the recipients of the teaching; they had been healed; they had seen the miracles. The children were already being fed, and now it was the dog's turn.

And with this, the woman wins her case. In the controversy narrative that comes immediately before this story, Jesus argues with the Pharisees and scribes, and consequently, they are silent. Their silence is an indicator of their defeat and as such, they are shamed. When the woman cleverly responds to Jesus' insult, Jesus concedes the argument, allowing himself to be shamed. Watch as the identities change: Jesus, who is called Lord and to whom the woman bows, is humbled so that the declared outsider and dog may sit at the table.

Mark never specifically comments on the woman's faith, but she disregards what may be thought of her and as Luther says, pushes through the no to the yes, actions necessarily informed by faith.[1] She knows that Jesus is able; she takes it upon herself to convince him to be willing. She begs for grace and trusts that Jesus has given it, even from a distance. This is the faith of the centurion in Luke's Gospel—another Gentile—

1. Martin Luther, *Sermons of Martin Luther* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983), 2:152–54.

who humbles himself and seeks out Jesus to heal his servant, but from afar: "Lord . . . I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed" (Luke 7.6–7). I find it fitting that in the Roman Catholic liturgy, this is the profession of faith that immediately precedes the communion feast. It is a confession of Jesus' lordliness and power, our own unworthiness and a plea for grace. It is the story of faith that accompanies eating the bread of new life.

As the story ends, the woman, for her part, goes home and sure enough, finds her daughter resting in bed with the demon gone. As for Jesus, his ministry is transformed. Prodded by this woman, Jesus makes real the changes he has called for: the principle of inclusion is now put fully into practice. Immediately after this story, while in Gentile territory, Jesus heals a deaf man who couldn't speak, signifying a growth in understanding on the part of Gentiles. And then, while still in Gentile territory, he feeds the four thousand. The bread that fell from the table, the bread of new life, is now the bread that nourishes the Gentile community as well as the Jews.

What a happy ending! It would be simple to end here and urge all those who are struggling in prayer to persist and perhaps to banter with God, but sometimes all the wit, candor and self-abasement will do nothing to change the events of our lives. The apostle Paul dealt with this dilemma. He spoke of having a thorn in the flesh and how he desperately pleaded three times to have it leave him. However, God responded to him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12.9). God's answer to Paul was "no," but not without reason: "My grace is sufficient for you." As much as we long to be chosen to display God's glory, maybe instead we are being called to show forth God's grace.

But what does grace look like in the face of our unavoidable struggles? Suffering and servanthood are recurring themes in Mark's Gospel, but the trials we are given should not be confused with suffering; they are not crosses that we take up. Rather, they are doorways to servanthood, forcing us to rely on God's grace and teaching us the compassion and courage we need to take up the suffering of others. When we meet as the body of Christ around the communion table to feast on the bread of liberation with our brothers and sisters, let us lay down our pain, fear, resentment and grief. And as we walk away, let us take up the burden that someone else has left behind. Let us care for the sick, visit the lonely, house the homeless.

Then, behold the transforming life of the kingdom. Perhaps this is how we can be like the Syrophoenician woman and push through God's "no" to the "yes" of "my grace is sufficient for you"—by embracing those who feel alienated and rejected as we have felt, and by seeking out ways to serve them. Through accepting our own unworthiness, we identify with those who are struggling, at which point God's grace is manifest and sufficient.

I think that this transformed life of service and inclusion will result not so much in diversity, but rather, a sort of homogeny. We will all be marked by the filth of poverty and the stench of suffering. In his novel *Les Misérables*, explaining the ways of the godly Monseigneur Bienvenue, especially among the poor, Victor Hugo wrote:

> But who can be in continual contact night and day with every distress, every misfortune and privation, without picking up a little of that holy poverty, like the dust of labor? Can you imagine a man near a fire who does not feel warm? Can you imagine a laborer working constantly at a furnace who has not one hair singed, nor a nail blackened, nor a drop of sweat, nor a speck of ashes on his face? The first proof of charity . . . is poverty.[2]

We will thus grow to look like each other as we increasingly resemble our Lord. Taking on the suffering of others unites us with them and includes us to eat with them. And as we gather together around the table

2. Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, trans. by Lee Fahnestock and Norman MacAfee (New York: Signet Classic, 1987), 46–47.

of our Lord to eat the bread of new life, our resemblances will only help us to be immediately recognized, known and loved.

I end with a prayer by Pope Paul VI:

> Make us worthy, Lord, to serve our fellow men throughout the world who live and die in poverty and hunger. Give them through our hands this day their daily bread, and by our understanding love, give peace and joy.

May it be so.

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