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Women Count

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Women Count

Jeff Miller

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, ²⁵but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. ²⁶Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷He 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." ²⁸But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." ²⁹Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." ³⁰So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone. (Mark 7.24–30 NRSV)

It's hard to overestimate the complexity of what's happening right here, right now. At first glance, one might simply say, "We're listening to a sermon." And while that is, of course, true, such a simple statement doesn't really do justice to the situation. Think for a moment about your morning. Most of you have had a good morning, but very likely a few of you have not. Some of you slept well; perhaps a few of you just came from a night shift. Now think about yesterday...and about last week...and last month. And on and on it goes. My point is that an incalculable number of trajectories are converging right here, right now. Your family, your education, your profession, your emotions...you bring all these themes here with you, and they influence what you'll take away from here as well. So if a visitor were to look in on us and ask, "What's happening in there?" no simple answer would suffice. You could say, "We're worshipping." Or, "It's a sermon." But whatever you say would surely lead to more questions.

Preaching about this story from Mark chapter 7 is like that. It's as if we are glimpsing a moment in the ministry of Jesus, and this sermon is the answer to the question "What's happening over there?" I could simply say, "Jesus has been asked to heal a child." Or, "Jesus is insulting a woman." Or, "Jesus is illustrating what he taught in the prior story." What I'd like to say is, "Mark the Gospel writer is bringing together an interwoven stream of trajectories in order to challenge some of the Christians who lived around AD 70 and their view of discipleship." But whatever I say is going to lead to more questions. For example, here are seven questions you might ask after glimpsing this story:

- Why did Jesus walk thirty miles to the region of Tyre?
- Why did Jesus want so desperately to be alone?
- What precisely is demon possession?
- Why would Jesus deny the woman's request?
- Why would he deny her in a way that could offend her?
- Does Jesus change his mind in this story?
- And one of the most important questions we could ask after glimpsing this episode in Mark's Gospel: Of all the stories Mark could have included, why this one?

You should know that I'm not going to answer all seven questions. I do hope to answer some of them, but to do so I need to get a running start at this story. Like a good storyteller, Mark weaves threads throughout his

story. There are more of these than I have time to follow. I am, however, going to follow three of Mark's trajectories from the beginning of the book up to the sermon text for today.

The first one is kind of fun to follow. It's food. Someone is eating on essentially every page of Mark's Gospel. Usually it's Jesus and his disciples. Bread in Mark is a symbol of the presence of God's kingdom, of God's blessing, of God's work in the world that is blossoming in the life, teaching and ministry of Jesus. I'll give you seven examples, one for each chapter leading up to our story:

- In chapter 1 Jesus is in the wilderness, tempted by Satan. Though the Gospels of Matthew and Luke say Jesus *fasted* during this experience, Mark makes no such claim. Mark doesn't want to remove this important symbol from Jesus' time of trial.
- In chapter 2 Jesus is asked why his disciples don't fast. Not only do they eat a lot, but they openly eat with sinners. And his reply, if I may loosely paraphrase, is "The kingdom of God is a party!" To be more precise, he says the kingdom of God is like a wedding feast, and it makes no sense to fast at a feast.
- In chapter 3 we read, "Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, such a large crowd that they *couldn't even eat!*"
- In chapter 4 Jesus tells his first parable, the parable of the sower. And, of course, the sower was sowing grain, which is food. Some seed fell on good soil and produced lots and lots of food.
- In chapter 5 Jesus raises a twelve-year-old girl from the dead—his most amazing miracle to date! When the girl gets up, what does Jesus say? "Give her something to eat."
- In chapter 6 we come to Jesus' most famous food story—the feeding of the five thousand, which begins with five loaves and two fish and ends with a satisfied multitude and twelve baskets of leftovers.
- In chapter 7, right before our text for today, Jesus criticizes the Pharisees for their especially exacting eating customs, which tended to oppress rather than liberate people. Mark's side comment is that Jesus, as a result of this teaching, declared all foods clean. That is, eat anything you want!

And then we come to our story, which—of course—involves eating and mention of bread and bread crumbs.

Having arrived at our story, it's time to back up again and follow a second trajectory forward. This second trajectory is a double claim about the nature of Jesus and his kingdom. On the one hand, the clear claim is that the kingdom of God is a kingdom of abundance. There is enough food (both literal and metaphorical) for everyone—even for 5,000 plus. There is indeed unlimited power for everyone—power to heal, power to save, even power to raise the dead. We read that the power of the kingdom is so abundant that Jesus doesn't even have to cast out demons; instead, the demons see him coming, fall down before him, and proclaim him the Son of God.

The other side of the claim of abundance is that just a tiny taste of the kingdom is enough to change your life. Mark's message is, "Jesus provides an ocean of power and goodness, and I suggest you start with just a drop." Mark must know the psalm, "Taste and see that the Lord is good."

Consider the woman who is healed after twelve years of bleeding; she need only touch his robe, and she is immediately healed. And listen to a similar verse from chapter 6: "And wherever Jesus went, in villages, cities, or countryside, they laid the sick in the marketplaces and implored him that they *might touch even the fringe of his garment*. And everyone who touched it was made well." These people are gathering the bread crumbs of the kingdom, and they feel privileged to do so. However, not everyone in Mark understands this two-sided feature of the kingdom. In chapter 10, for example, James and John ask to be the most important people in Christ's kingdom. They aren't content with bread crumbs; they want the whole loaf. Contrast the desperate Gentile woman in our story. She grasps this two-fold truth: Jesus could indeed provide a lavish feast, but she would be content with a crust of bread.

Having arrived at our story a second time, I need to back up and follow a third trajectory. And here's a heads up, this is the most important one for the sake of our story. It's the theme of discipleship: What does it take to follow Jesus? What does it look like to be a disciple of Christ? *Mark, writing a generation after Jesus, wants the Christian disciples of his own day to identify with the original disciples of Jesus.* When

Mark shows Jesus' disciples failing, the reader should recall her or his own failings. When he shows Jesus' disciples growing in faith, the reader should take heart and grow in faith as well. Mark accomplishes this sense of identity with a variety of literary devices, and one of the central devices is a travel motif. Jesus and his disciples are nearly always on the move in Mark's Gospel. In the first half of the book, for example, Jesus and his disciples take the five-mile trip across the Sea of Galilee again and again and again. Each time, Jesus does one or just a few things on the respective side of the sea before getting back in the boat to return. Foot travel is just as abundant. In the opening words of our story, we learn that Jesus has just walked *about thirty miles*. And in the opening words of the next story, only seven verses later, Jesus is on the road again, this time embarking on an even longer trek.

The reason this is the most important trajectory is that it's the one that most clearly involves *you*. Jesus said what he said to this woman for the sake of his disciples, and then Mark recorded the story for the sake of his disciples, and you and I still stand in that centuries-long line of disciples. Thus in a very real way you are part of this story. You are the bystanders, and both Jesus and Mark want you to see the story happen, to ponder why it happened, and to go on your way changed because of it.

As so we again arrive at our story, just as Jesus is arriving in the region of Tyre, and the journey motif promptly piques our attention for a lesson in how to follow Jesus. Anyone who has traveled a long way with a small group—by foot or car—knows that conversation is as natural a part of the experience as the actual travel is. No one invites you to go hiking and then hikes the whole way in silence. So we rightly infer that a long journey is a time for the disciples to interact with Jesus, learning about him and from him. Furthermore, anyone who has walked a long distance knows that you can get a lot of thinking done in that time. So we rightly infer that Jesus has done a lot of thinking, and much of his thinking has been about the disciples. He thinks, "How can I make them understand? I told them, I told them again, and I told them again. I've even shown them, and they still don't get it. I think it's time to take it to the next level and shock them into understanding!" And sure enough, the first chance he gets upon their arrival, he shocks them.

A woman approaches; she's a local, and thus a Gentile. Jesus has already taught his disciples that God doesn't play favorites or observe purity laws. He has eaten with sinners, and without washing his hands properly. He let an unclean woman touch him. He even touched a corpse. But what about a Gentile? And what about a Gentile *from Tyre*—a city one first-century Jewish historian called "our most vile enemies"? And what about a *female* Gentile from Tyre? Hey, what about a female Gentile from Tyre who has a demon back at the house! Sure Jesus is prone to set aside various Jewish customs, but at least that was *within* Judaism. Now he's got the disciples' attention, and they're wondering if he's going to take his acceptance policy up a notch.

When the woman speaks, the story seems right on track. She bows down in respect. In fact, she shows him as much respect as any other character in the book! She is anything but selfish, for her request is not for herself, but for her daughter, a small child. When Jesus responds, however, the mood changes. Indeed, it is the words of Jesus that establish this as one of his most vexing encounters. Not only does he deny her request, but his denial includes that infamous line: "... it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs."

Because Jesus' reply is so abrasive, I need to address it. But only briefly, for we shouldn't let a detail derail us. I don't want to erase Jesus' words from the page altogether, but I do want to take some sting out of them. I'll try to put some salve on the sting of his dog language, and then we'll return to moving toward meaning and application.

Jesus uses a particular word that means "small dog" rather than just "dog." Commentators are quick to point this out, and also quick to say that it doesn't matter. To call a woman a dog or a doggie, they say, is equally offensive. And of course they are right. But my point is not that Jesus calls *the woman* a puppy; I believe he calls *the daughter* a puppy. Just read the story, and I think you'll agree. And a detail of the Greek text supports my point as well. The same diminutive suffix that Mark puts on "dog" to turn it into "little dog" is also affixed to the word for daughter, which is why verse 25 calls her a "little daughter." Both of these words, "little dog" and "little daughter," are rare, occurring nowhere in either testament except this story. The suffix is Mark's marker that Jesus is referring specifically to the daughter. I trust you'll agree that it is less offensive to call a small child a puppy than it is to call a woman a dog.

Back to the story. Does the woman cower like a whipped puppy? No. Does she lash out like a wounded dog? No. She responds with deference to Jesus, calling him “Lord.” But she also responds with boldness, and with wit. “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs under the table eat the children’s scraps.” By the way, notice where the dogs are. Many commentators talk of packs of wild dogs scavenging for food, but Mark pictures dogs inside the house waiting for children to throw bits of food to them. And this woman would be just as delighted with a scrap of blessing from Jesus as those dogs are when a child tosses them a morsel.

We come now to verse 29, the story’s main course. Jesus doesn’t snap back at her; instead, he applauds her response! He says that precisely because of her response she may go. Jesus then ends the encounter by saying, “the demon has left your daughter.” It is important—very important, I think—to notice that he uses the perfect tense, “has left.” Not “will leave,” not “is leaving.” The perfect tense typically refers to something that occurred in the past and remains true or in effect at the time of the speaking or writing. What I’m suggesting is that Jesus *already* healed the daughter when he was first asked to. I can’t prove this, but it is a natural reading of the story, and it fits with Mark’s style, and with the compassion that Jesus shows elsewhere in Mark. This would change things a bit, wouldn’t it? He heals promptly for the sake of the girl, but doesn’t say so *for the sake of the disciples*. Notice, by the way, that his response doesn’t include the word “no.” It’s not a refusal as much as a probing. After a three-sentence conversation, during which the woman’s stress level soars but she nevertheless remains composed and confident, Jesus reveals that he’s already healed the daughter and the woman is free to return home to “taste and see that the Lord is good.”

Well, we’ve had three running starts and one slow walk through the story. So what’s the message? Part of the message is how a disciple of Jesus should view and treat Gentiles. Part of the message is how a disciple of Jesus should view and treat oppressors and enemies, which is what Tyre was to Galilee. And part of the message is how a disciple of Jesus should view and treat women. All three of these are worthy of a sermon, and to be sure, a better preacher could drive home the first two points in a powerful and relevant way. But this sermon—this sermon is about women. Indeed, the title of the sermon is “Women Count.”

So how could this text, in which Jesus speaks so abrasively to a woman, give rise to a sermon titled “Women Count?” Let me move toward an answer with some quotations. The first two are from a book by Kenneth E. Bailey titled *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes*. Bailey lived in the Middle East for forty years. He says, “Even today in the Middle East, in conservative areas, men and women do not talk to strangers across the gender barrier. In public rabbis did not talk to female members of their own families.”¹ Again, he says, “[Jesus] breaks the social taboo against talking to a woman.... Throughout forty years of life in the Middle East I never crossed this social boundary line. In village society, a strange man does not even make eye contact with a woman in a public place.”² Consider another quotation, this one from the Mishnah, “He who talks much with womankind brings evil upon himself....”³

We are shocked by *what* Jesus says to the woman, but we should be shocked *that he speaks to her at all!* Moreover, he speaks to her about weighty matters. The kind of back-and-forth that we see between the two of them is much the way that first-century rabbis discussed religion. For Jesus to engage her in this way, in public, is to treat her as intellectually capable, to show her respect—like a professor respects a female student by questioning her, rather than letting something slide because she is a girl.

Remember the disciples who are standing by? Jesus is saying to them, “Women Count.” And forty years later Mark is saying through his gospel, “Women Count.” And nearly two thousand years later I’m reminding you, “Women Count.”

Do you think women should have a voice in Washington DC? Of course you do. But if you think that seventeen female Senators is enough, then you should ask yourself if you really think women count.

Do you think women should have a voice in business? Of course you do. Did you know that only twenty-four of America’s one thousand largest companies have a woman as CEO? If you think 2.4 percent is enough, then you should ask yourself if you really think women count.

¹ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2008), 220.

² *Ibid.*, 203.

³ *m. ’Abot* 1:4.

Do you think women should have a voice in the church? Perhaps you do. But if you think the choir and the nursery are sufficient venues for that voice, you should ask yourself if you really think women count.

Our world is more androcentric and more patriarchal than most of us realize. Examples abound, but I only have time to give one.

That example is the 1984 New International Version of the Bible. The Greek New Testament contains the word for woman/women 215 times, and it contains the word for man/men 216 times—a difference of only one. The NIV only has woman/women 259 times (thus they appropriately added it forty-four times in order to make a smooth translation). Now brace yourself. . .the NIV has man/men 1138 times—which means they’ve added it 922 times! What’s happened here is that the English Bible translators have made the Bible much more male-oriented than it originally was! Or to be blunt, they didn’t think women count.

One of the places the NIV adds the word “men” without good reason is in the story of the feeding of the four thousand. You remember, of course, the feeding of the five thousand, which comes before our text for today. In that feeding story the text specifically says there were “five thousand *men*.” Now who did the counting? Not Jesus. It was the disciples. Why did they count only the men? Not to save time. It’s because in their world and even in their minds women didn’t count as much as men. How do you think the women in the crowd that day (women, by the way, who may well have been in the majority) felt as the disciples passed right by them to count the men?

The feeding of the four thousand comes after our story. That is, the disciples’ glimpse of Jesus encountering the Syrophenician woman is sandwiched between two miraculous mass feeding stories. In the second one, the disciples count four thousand people. The text doesn’t say “four thousand *men*” like it does before, just “four thousand *people*.”

And now I’m finally getting right down to the point. It seems the disciples *got the message*. The second feeding takes place in Gentile territory, and they don’t seem to mind a bit! And when they count the hungry multitude, *they count the women as well as the men*. Thus Jesus and a Gentile woman from the region of Tyre have together changed the disciples. They now understand that *women count*. I hope the same is true of us.

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