

Pentecost 15B 05 September 2021
Mark 7:24-37
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth
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Grace, peace, and healing to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

From there he [Jesus] 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. Let's pray:

With great expectation, she crosses the threshold between the heat of the day and the cool interior of the house. She crosses the threshold between Gentile and Jew. She crosses the threshold between death and life and bows down at the feet of Jesus.

With fear and trembling, she crosses the threshold between life and death. She crosses the threshold between Jew and Gentile. She crosses the threshold between a cool reception and the flaming heat of torment. The Syrophenician mother inches forward warily remembering that only fools rush in where angels fear to tread. She knows what to expect before she even enters the room. A fresh spray of blasphemy on the walls she washed down only yesterday. Jagged shards of pottery strewn about the kitchen floor waiting to slice her feet. Screams and curses piercing her once peaceful abode.

But this time is different. No spray, no shards, no screams. With an electrifying mixture of curiosity and fear, the woman moves cautiously into the bedroom and pushes the curtain aside. The commotion she'd become fearful of is absent. She looks at her little daughter lying peacefully on the bed. Her eyes are shut, her breathing is gentle, and her body is finally at rest. Greatly relieved, the woman sits down on the edge of the bed next to her daughter and permits herself a knowing smile. The girl opens her eyes and smiles up at her mother, who sees that the demon is gone.

“She went home, found the child lying on the bed and the demon gone” (Mark 7:30).

The precursor to this drama is Jesus crossing the boundary into territory to the west and north of Galilee. Jesus crosses the threshold between Jews and Gentiles. He has embarked on his mission of spreading his message of salvation to all people. If Jesus hadn't set out and gone to the region of Tyre, the woman would not be sitting on the bed next to her smiling daughter.

“He entered a house and he did not want anyone to know he was there” (Mark 7:24b).

Why didn't Jesus want anyone to know he was around? Maybe it's because his cousin John was recently murdered (6:27). Maybe it's because he'd just fended off a challenge by the Pharisees and the scribes about his disciples eating with unwashed hands (7:1-8). Maybe it's because he's been on a whirlwind tour feeding the hungry (6:30-44), healing the sick (6:53-56), and teaching hostile crowds (7:9-23). Jesus was undoubtedly bereaved, fatigued, and besieged. Jesus needed some R and R.

“Yet he could not escape notice” (Mark 7:24c).

Jesus' reputation went ahead of him, and somebody noticed that he was in the house and pointed him out to the Syrophenician woman.

In another time and place, somebody noticed Jesus was in the house and told John Wesley. It was his mother, Susanna. Each morning the walls of the rectory at Epworth where John grew up echoed with the sounds of daily prayer and scripture reading. Even though Susanna had a lot of children, 19 in fact, she made sure that they all noticed that Jesus was in their house. She had a weekly schedule of private talks with each child. As a grown man, Wesley wrote to his mother saying, “I wish that we could continue our weekly meetings. I do not doubt that they would be as useful now for correcting my heart and forming my judgement as they were then.”*

“And she came and bowed down at his feet . . .” (Mark 7:25)

What extraordinary faith! This woman didn't know Jesus from a bar of soap. She'd never met him. Yet, here she is, bowing down in full submission at Jesus' feet. She believed Jesus could and would help her. Would it be that I could have such faith; such conviction.

The Syrophenician woman understood that, ‘faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen... that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible’ [Hebrews 11:1,3]. So, God, the Creator of all things seen and unseen, moved first in this woman's heart and prepared the way for her meeting with Jesus. God made himself accessible to the woman by leading her to Jesus. Faith enabled her to trust in God's mercy, giving her confidence in God's willingness to forgive sins, heal brokenness, and reconcile all things to himself.

“And she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter” (Mark 7:26).

Even a crumb of confidence was enough to make this woman persist. Even though Jesus was a Jew, a rabbi, and a man and she was a Gentile, a woman, and her daughter was possessed by a demon. Many would have considered her plight a punishment for sin. Jesus sees differently. Jesus searches her heart and sees an opportunity to teach his disciples a valuable lesson. He baits the woman and draws out the faithful response he knows is there. So strong was her desire for her daughter's healing that she dared to match wits with Jesus: ““Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs”” (Mark 7:28), following which, Jesus says to her, ““For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your child”” (Mark 7:29). The woman's wise retort completes the journey of faith beginning with God and ending in his glorification.

And yet, she still has to endure the trip home, step by step, praying something like, ““I believe, help my unbelief”” (Mark 9:24)!

The unnamed woman still has the trip home toward the final scene that would never have happened if Jesus hadn't gone to Tyre, if someone hadn't let her know Jesus was in the house, and if she'd not had just a crumb of faith to persevere in making her request.

But Jesus had come to Tyre, and Jesus was in the house, and someone did bring him to her attention, and she did have faith enough to endure, and he did grant her request.

And so she approaches her home, almost afraid to push the door open, scarcely daring to believe, tempted not to transgress the threshold between faith and disbelief, hope and disappointment, life and death; her whole world frozen in suspended animation. She steels herself and bristling with anticipation, takes a giant leap of faith and enters the room.

Something has changed. The heat of fiery torment has gone and the fragrance of spring; new life, lingers in the air. No spray, no shards, no screams. With her heart pounding and head giddy with an admixture of curiosity and fear, the woman edges into the bedroom and nervously pushes the curtain aside. The commotion she'd become fearful of is absent. She looks at her little daughter lying peacefully on the bed. Her eyes are shut, her breathing is gentle, and her body is peacefully at rest. With tears streaming down her face, this relieved mother sits down on the edge of the bed next to her daughter and permits herself a knowing smile. The girl opens her eyes and smiles up at her mother, who sees that the demon is gone (Mark 7:30).

God's love transcends all physical and spiritual boundaries to bring peace and goodwill into the world; to open the eyes of the blind, unstop the ears of the deaf, make the lame leap, and the speechless sing for joy (Isaiah 35:5-6).

And with the unequalled power of faith, hope, and love coalescing in our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, Almighty God says to you, "Be strong, do not fear! Your faith has made you well." And, Dear Saints, your faith is making others well, to the glory of our gracious God. Amen.

And the peace of God, which knows no boundaries, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, forever. Amen.

*Collins, Kenneth, 2003. *John Wesley: A Theological Journey*, Abingdon Press, page 19.
