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Mark 7: 24-36
The Triumph of Mercy

A seminary intern was so excited to do the children's sermon because the kids were always so engaged. Looking at their cheerful faces, she said, "I have something for you in this basket. If I give you some clues, can you guess what it is?" Everyone nodded eagerly, so she continued. "Okay. It is round. The outside is black and crunchy. But the inside is white and fluffy." No guesses. "Okay. Another clue. Sometimes it is fun to dip it in a big glass of milk. And sometimes it is fun to pull it apart and eat the filling first." As she looked at those sweet young children, she saw a lot of confusion on their faces. Finally, one little boy piped up. "It really sounds like an Oreo, but I know the answer is Jesus."

If it doesn't look like Jesus, sound like Jesus, or act like Jesus, is it still Jesus?

The Jesus we learned in Sunday School is as sublimely patient, generous, merciful, kind and gentle as a kindergarten teacher. He is always reaching out to heal people, has a soft spot for children, for misfits, for people who are hungry. He reminds us to be our best selves.

But the Jesus who wants to escape from everyone, who rebukes a woman only seeking health for her beloved daughter and in the process reveals a seeming distaste for puppy dogs, and then has the gall to change his mind like a politician rather than like our all-knowing, never-changing God . . . well, he doesn't sound much like the "Jesus loves me this I know" Jesus we grew up with. And I doubt there are any illustrations of his exchange with the Syrophenician woman in any children's bibles!

I'd guess that Jesus might not, at first, have recognized himself in the encounter. The Gospel of Mark is clear that Jesus understood his mission as bringing salvation to his Jewish brethren. His devoted his time, energy, and focus offering healing and hope to a people who struggled physically, politically, economically, and spiritually under the Pax Romana and under the increasingly rigid rules and traditions of their faith leaders. Up until this moment, he was clear about the boundaries of his calling. This Syrophenician woman and her child were not part of it.

At a moment when Jesus had traveled far out of his way in order to get some rest and recovery from the crowds ever pressing in on him, when he had traveled outside the neighborhoods of the Jewish community and into primarily gentile territory where he thought he might escape notice, Jesus finds himself accosted by someone who doesn't fall under his missional category.

She shouldn't have known about him or found him. She should not have dared to seek healing from him. You see, the Syrophenicians were an ancient semitic people related to the biblical Canaanites who were likely, because of their ethnic and religious status, of a higher economic status than their Jewish neighbors; New Testament scholar Sharon Ringe has suggested that the woman represents a group whose "policies and lifestyle would have been a source of suffering for her mostly poorer, rural Jewish neighbors." She could be symbolic of those in James' congregation who showed preference for the rich among them and refused table hospitality to the

poor. Not someone he would be inclined to invite in for tea because of all of these external differences and resentments between her people and his people. There were many reasons for Jesus to dismiss her as someone who had no place at the table spread for God's children. At least not as he defined his mission.

Yet somehow this woman hears about him. Like the synagogue leader who sends his servants to summon Jesus to heal his sick daughter, this desperate woman locates Jesus and interrupts his privacy as she seeks healing for her demon-possessed daughter. In her desperation, she has the nerve to intrude upon the private space of this Jewish healer. And the nerve to expect that he would show her and her daughter the same mercy and compassion he has shown to all of the crowds of God's chosen people.

But the woman is desperate for the healing of her beloved daughter and their restoration to their community and is willing to breach every social and cultural standard to beg Jesus for help.

Jesus is curt. He may be paraphrasing what was probably a common Jewish saying when he says, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." By those words, Jesus reflects his understanding of his mission, his God-ordained calling: to save God's people, the Jews. They are the children. Everyone else, this woman and her daughter included, are the "*kunaria*," or "little dogs." Jesus cannot afford to turn his eyes, even for a moment, from his goal. He can only feed the children.

If Jesus were to rebuke you like this, what would you do? I imagine I might hang my head in shame and slink out the door, murmuring profuse apologies all the way. But this woman isn't deterred. She does not retreat. Nor does she get huffy and defensive. Instead, she uses her wits and points out the obvious flaw in his statement. "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

Wow. She has a point. Even Jesus, who has shared countless tables and countless meals with people of all ages, even Jesus, who was once a child himself, has to concede. He knows just how messy kids are at the table. So, unlike politicians, who dig deeper into their positions when they are found to be incorrect, Jesus corrects course. This woman reminds him that God's mercy is as broad and deep as the ocean, which laps on the shores of rich and poor, Jew and gentile, alike. There is enough of God's mercy and healing for everyone.

'For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter.' For her wisdom, her clear thinking, Jesus heals her daughter from afar. In Matthew's version, Jesus praises her faith; in Mark's telling, her faith has nothing to do with it. Jesus rewards her ability to widen his understanding of his mission. In his ministry, Jesus has been teaching that it is not human traditions and divisions, the external identifiers of communities and individuals, that matter to God, but what comes from inside our hearts, our center – our thoughts, our words and our actions, how we treat one another. Through the clear logic of this gentile woman, Jesus recognizes that healing her daughter is not deviating from or hurting his primary calling to God's Jewish children. He is enlarged, his understanding of who is his neighbor grows, his table expands. To use modern psychological parlance, he becomes a more self-integrated person, a person whose thoughts, feelings, and actions are unified.

Paul Tillich, one of the great theologians of the 20th century, argued that there are three basic functions of life: Self-integration, self-creativity, and self-transformation. In order to be a self-integrated person, in order to attain that unity of self, he believed that we first had to find our center, understand our center. As people of faith, as Christians in particular, we claim that our center is God, our creator, parent, savior. 19th century Christian philosopher Soren Kierkegaard expressed that center as a “purity of heart” which is “to will one thing: the Good.” And the good, for Kierkegaard, and for Tillich, is God. Once we find that center, which is God, which is the Good, which is, Jesus himself tells us, seeking that which is of God and serves God’s ends for mercy, beauty, compassion and justice, we have only started the path of self-integration. Tillich believed that to become integrated, or whole and fully-realized, people, demands that we are always in the process of moving outward from our center in freedom and courage, knowing that with every step we take away from our center we risk disintegration, but also knowing that if we truly know our center, we will not disintegrate, but will be able to return at any time to that center enriched and deepened for our journeys outward, our engagement with the wider world with its questions and struggles and needs.

Jesus, in his interaction with the Syrophenician woman, experiences this self-integration that Tillich wrote about. He discovers that the strength of his center, of his deep knowledge of and relationship with God, his trust in God, frees him to step outside the tight confines of his understanding of his mission in life. He did not, would not, disintegrate, by expanding his vision and extending his healing powers to this gentile woman and her child. Healing her was actually willing the Good that God desires for God’s creation. In fact, this entire interaction seems to have spurred Jesus out of his quiet retreat and back on the road to heal a man who was deaf and mute. Jesus has added extra leaves to God’s table and expanded the guest list to the great banquet. The exchange did not reveal Jesus as someone of weak convictions who flip-flops. Instead, it reveals a fully human, fully God savior who responds to, who is bent and moved by, the prayers and pleas of his people for the healing and wholeness that can only widen and deepen the healing and wholeness of the world. It reveals a fearless savior who draws us into his realm of restoration and growth as he models how to do it, how to integrate our thoughts, our feelings and our deeds with this ultimate Good that sustains us.

Like Jesus, we are a little frayed, worn out from the demands and needs and chaos of the world. As we celebrate Homecoming Sunday together, the gathering together of friends and family around not only our congregation’s tables outside, but God’s table here, Jesus and the Syrophenician woman invite us to consider our own understanding of our mission, our calling as a church. We receive here the food and strength to journey back out into the world to serve, to heal, to love, to sustain a community, a world crying in need, to return again and again to this center, the Well of living water, knowing God will sustain us. We will not disintegrate when we leave the safety of this place but return fuller and wiser. We gather here to worship and celebrate the God we know in Jesus, so we might go into the world more fully the people God created us to be, whose words and deeds and hopes and dreams reflect the wild, unbelievable, greater than we could ever imagine Goodness of God.

Does it look like Jesus, does it feel like Jesus, does it act like Jesus? This is our center, our truth, and our mission. Amen.