

## Jesus and the Syrophenician Woman

Mark 7: 24 to 30

<sup>24</sup> Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre.<sup>[a]</sup> He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret. <sup>25</sup> In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an impure spirit came and fell at his feet. <sup>26</sup> The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter.

<sup>27</sup> “First let the children eat all they want,” he told her, “for it is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the puppies.”

<sup>28</sup> “Lord,” she replied, “even the puppies under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”

<sup>29</sup> Then he told her, “For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter.”

<sup>30</sup> She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

MAY WE PRAY...

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of ALL of our heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

My Mother was a woman of her time – white, British stock, politically conservative, and a “Bellevillian.” I mention the latter because, for most of her 98 years, most all of the people she interacted with were “WASPS.” White – Anglo-Saxon – Protestants and Straight. She was not particularly fond of other kinds of people. But things changed as “the other” got brought into her life in a gradual and loving way.

- Her grandson Tom married Julie who is Korean, and she loved Julie like a granddaughter
- Her granddaughter Sarah married a Mediterranean man – and my mother had been praying for a husband for Sarah. So...
- We consider our daughter Anna’s bestie our niece. And her husband our nephew-in-law. And their children are our grand-nephews and grand-niece. These little ones – who Mom loved to see pictures of and hear about – are black.
- Her car mechanic who treated Mom like she was his own grandmother was First Nations and his shop was on the Tyendinega Mohawk Reserve.
- What we didn’t tell her but I think she figured out is that our Sudbury family of 3 is a “Rainbow” family – one is non-binary, one is gay, and one is trans.

One birthday our Mom said, “When we [meaning our family] all get together, it’s like a meeting of the United Nations.”

I tell you this story because people can and do change their ideas and have new experiences of race and gender.

And I’m going to pick up on this in the latter part of my reflection today.

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In today’s Gospel reading we have the infamous story of Jesus and the Syrophenician woman. This Greek woman, whose little daughter was possessed by an impure spirit, came and fell at his feet, and begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter.

Jesus responded by saying, “First let the children eat all they want, for it is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the puppies.” She replied, “Lord, even the puppies under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” Then Jesus told her “For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter.”

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There are a variety of ways the story of Jesus’s encounter with the Syrophenician woman can be read.

Let’s look at three.

Number One. And my least favourite and considered theologically unlikely by conservative scholars... Jesus was in fact fallible and racist; the woman “taught him a thing or two” by her response; he changed and moved on from his narrow, exclusive view; and so we should be willing to do the same.

This doesn’t make sense to me. By now, in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus has healed the servant of a Centurion, and has exorcized a non-Jewish man in the Gerasene area. After this healing of the Greek woman’s daughter, he heals a mute man that some Biblical scholars think was likely a Gentile. And the feeding of the four thousand was likely at the Decapolis – which is Gentile space.

Did Jesus learn? Of course he did. He learned to walk, to speak Aramaic, to read Hebrew, and to be a carpenter. But he's still God's Son, God's Messiah. With a mission that he has to carry out very carefully.

Number Two. My favourite but theologically not even considered. Jesus and the Syrophenician woman were merely jesting with each other. That the wording he used was very likely a parallel to "Charity begins at home." And she quipped back with "...but it shouldn't end there."

Problem with this? There aren't any other records of Jesus joking with people – at least none that I'm aware of. And this would be uncompassionate. This woman's daughter is in very bad shape and she herself is taking a big risk by coming to Jesus.

Number Three. Theologically preferred by scholars and who am I to disagree? 😊  
Jesus did not use the derogatory term of "junk-yard-dog" – and that is how most Jews felt about Gentiles. Rather he used the diminutive term of "puppy." Greek people had house dogs. When I say the word "puppy" to you, you likely think of a very adorable creature. This is how this Greek women very likely felt. This would not have been intended as an insult and was not received as one. And while we may think the woman convinced him to do something – heal her daughter... I fully believe that Jesus had already intended to do this. Else he would not have engaged with her in the first place.

To repeat. Jesus DID focus His ministry on the Jewish people, not on the Gentiles. But that didn't make him a racist. Jesus came as the last in a long line of Jewish prophets, though he was more than a prophet. Jesus was born a Jew and came FIRST to the Jews. If he had focused his ministry on the Gentiles more than he was already doing, he would have lost credibility with the Jewish people. Anytime he crossed a racial boundary, it was significant, but even still it happened on a regular basis.

To emphasize my point, I'll list again the non Jews in Mark's Gospel alone that Jesus had compassion for and / or provided healing for:

- The servant of a hated Gentile soldier
- A Gentile demoniac outcast
- This Gentile woman who would no give up
- A Gentile man who was mute and
- 4000 hungry people in the Decapolis area – which is Gentile territory - showing a love that transcends race.

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I started this reflection by showing how a person can - with time and love - overcome racist and rainbow-phobic attitudes and opinions.

I have asserted that Jesus was by no means fallible and racist. His ministry on earth had a definite outreach to Gentiles, while the people he had come primarily to save had been the Jews.

Now I want to talk about a very real situation where a person had zero time and no reason to learn to love her enemy neighbour.

I'm referring to the Rwandan genocide where Hutu gangs killed close to a million Tutsis in about 100 days. We've heard about this, but did we know that in Rwanda close to 95% of the people are Christians?

Also, little has been said about Hutus who hid Tutsis. And to be honest, there weren't many. The hatred was so great. And the few who did, were ostracized by their community after the rampage.

Meet Hutu Olive Mukankusi who to this day lives in a two-room house with mud walls and a dirt floor in a village called Igati. She saved two Tutsi girls – ages 15 and 17 – and a 55 year old woman. Up until the genocide happened, they had all been neighbours. Not fighting but not besties. Just living tolerantly.

It was terribly brave and kind for Olive to do what she did. She had a husband and a son, and hiding Tutsis was punishable by death. But she did it anyway. And she and the three women and her family survived. It broke the family financially because she had to bribe the Hutu gangs. And sadly her husband was jailed for 12 years because he was falsely accused by the Tutsis of genocide. Which impoverished her further.

Another woman – Godleaves Mukamunana – has a parallel story – except that she had a daughter.

Both Olive and Godleaves wanted to send their children to college – but they were so broke from paying bribes and legal fees and not having incomes from their husbands during their jail time. And the story would be terribly sad if it stopped here. But it doesn't.

The stories of Olive and Godleaves were reported on by NPR – National Public Radio – in the States – “Remembering Rwandans Who Followed Their Conscience.” And an amazing woman who heard their stories in April 2014, Maggie Rush Vinciguerra, started

a Go Fund Me Campaign to raise \$10,000 for these children - Jean and Antoinette – so they could get a college education. She and fellow volunteers and donors did it!

This is what Maggie wrote in January 2017.

“Hi Everyone -

I wanted to let you know that we have reached our funding goal for Jean and Antoinette. This effort started in 2014 - the 20 year anniversary of the Rwandan genocide...

This has been a leap of faith and a labor of love and on behalf of everyone who has been involved, thank you for believing in this mission, in making a difference and changing the lives of these two young people.

Wishing you a new year filled with love and light.”

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Sitting here you may be thinking, “Dang! I sure wish I could have contributed to that campaign. For a little bit of money I could have helped to secure the future of some young people.”

Good news! You still can. Not for Jean and Antoinette – but for thousands of other children and adults who have no hope of education or a trade. Not without help from an organization like MCC – Mennonite Central Committee. Those of you who have computers, type MCC Canada and Education into your web-browser, or look in your bulletin, and this is what you’ll read...

When a child learns, communities’ benefit and lives change. Through MCC's education programs, we work alongside local communities and partners to:

- Increase access to education, especially for low-income families, girls, ethnic minorities, and children affected by disabilities, HIV, or violence.
- Improve the quality of education through professional development for teachers, educational materials, and other support for schools.
- Support vocational training to help youth find work in their home communities.
- Promote peace clubs and other initiatives to help develop young people’s full potential as leaders.

“Every gift makes a difference,” MCC asserts. This means that all of us have the ability to make a difference. Listen to this.

- \$8 provides items for one school kit
- \$12 provides a school uniform and shoes for one child in DR Congo

- \$30 helps to cover costs of classroom materials and teacher training for the deafblind program in Jordan
- \$175 provides a carbon water filter for one school in Nicaragua

Grace Mennonite Church typically gives on average \$7500 for multiple projects per year. And you can add to this individually, if you like. Just contact Darlene Bartha, Manager of Donor Relations, at the phone number or email address in your bulletin.

I want to close by paraphrasing a few verses from James 2.

<sup>15</sup> Suppose a brother or a sister is without education. <sup>16</sup> If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; get a better education,” but does nothing about their practical needs, what good is it?

You and I – through Grace and individually – have the opportunity to share our faith in words and deed. Thanks be to God for these marvelous opportunities. Amen.