

Sermon: Abide with Me

Year B, Proper 18

[Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23; Psalm 125; Isaiah 35:4-7a; Psalm 146; James 2:1-17; Mark 7:24-37](#)

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Rev. Catherine A. Merrill

This is one of those passages in the Bible where you say to yourself, did Jesus really say that? Did he really refuse to help this woman? Did he really call her and her daughter dogs? (Mark 7:27). Yeah. He did. And that's not like Jesus. Or not like the Jesus we know.

The daughter of the Syrophenician woman was ill. The mother heard of this man who had come north from the Jewish lands near the Sea of Galilee into gentile territory. He had healed other people. So, she searched him out in this house where he's hiding (Mark 7:24). *She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He 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." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."* (Mark 7:26-28).

The children who Jesus says should be fed first are the Jews. And she's a gentile. And she's a model of faith for us. Look what she does.

She seeks him out and bows down at his feet.¹ (Mark 7:25) She is a woman. She is alone. He is alone, hiding in this house (Mark 7:24). He is not of her people, he is not of her family or lineage. If anyone finds out she's been there with him, she'll become a social outcast. She is risking so much on this meeting. And yet there she is. When have we sought out Jesus? When have we bowed down? When have we risked things we valued because we sought out Jesus?

*When other helpers fail and comforts flee,
Help of the helpless, O abide with me.*

She bows down at his feet. She asks him to heal her daughter. He tells her "no" and calls her and her daughter dogs. She replies to him. She doesn't take "no" for an answer. Persistence and pleading aren't a substitute for faith². They are what faith look like when you have sought out Jesus and you have bowed down. Mark's gospel is full of disciples and Pharisees and learned people. None of them recognize Jesus for what he is. None of them are willing to shut up for a minute and actually listen to Jesus when he speaks of how the powers and principalities of this world are placing the emphasis on the wrong things, are leading us away from whom God is calling us to be.³ This mother is listening. She is bowed down. She a model of faith for Mark because she does what all the others have not done.

*Who like yourself my guide and strength can be?
Through cloud and sunshine, O abide with me.*

She bows down. She won't take "no" for an answer. And she has listened. She has listened so well that she reveals something to Jesus that he didn't appear to know. She doesn't protest that she and her daughter are not mongrels.⁴ She accepts Jesus' argument that the children of Israel

¹ Matthew L. Skinner, "'She Departed to Her House': Another Dimension of the Syrophenician Mother's Faith in Mark 7:24-30." *Word & World* 26, no. 1 (2006), 18.

² Skinner, 18.

³ Walter Wink, "The Education of the Apostles: Mark's View of Human Transformation." *Religious Education* 83, no. 2 (1988), 286.

⁴ Skinner, 17.

will go first. But she understands the Good News he is sharing in a way he does not. It only takes a crumb of God's Good News, only a table scrap is necessary to save her daughter, and Jesus has no reason or perhaps no ability withhold that blessing from her.⁵ No wonder he praises her logic, praises what she said (Mark 7:29). Jesus discerns God's intention for Jesus' ministry in her words.⁶ She is a model of faith for Jesus.

*Hold now your Word before my closing eyes.
Shine through the gloom and point me to the skies.*

And what does she do when Jesus says the demon has left her daughter (Mark 7:29)? She goes home. She doesn't drag Jesus with her. She doesn't demand proof or an amulet or something of Jesus to take with her. She just goes home.⁷ Because he has said her daughter is cured. No wonder she is a model of faith for us, for Mark and for Jesus.

So, is the message of this passage that if you bow down, if you really listen, if you articulate God's intention for this world clearly and precisely, your child will be healed? I don't think so.

I think this story is showing how safe it is to do this seemingly crazy thing of following Jesus. It's safe because he understands what it is like to be fully human. Jesus is out in the world, sharing the Good News of God's love and no one is getting it. No one is seeing what he means. No one is hearing what he says. He heals blind people and deaf people. And no one gets what he's doing. He's pointing out to all of us seemingly non-handicapped people that we are operating under the worst handicap of all. We are closed to God. And we don't even know it.

We can follow Jesus because he gets how hard it is to see our own limitations. It took the Syrophoenician woman to point out that Jesus was thinking way too small. That the Good News was for everyone. That the Good News was so big that a crumb was enough to change a life forever. If we would just open our eyes and our ears to it. And once we get a crumb on our tongue, a bit of bread, a drop of wine, once we get just a bit of the Good News in our life, we need to open up and speak plainly (Mark 7:35).

Because what brings out the best parts of the Good News that we are loved by God? Moms who go to bat for their daughters. Friends who bring their buddies who are cut off from the oral culture they live in to someone who can help.⁸ The moms and dads and friends who show up to say, "There is a feast God is calling us to. On great days. On dark days. When we feel abandoned. When we feel like we're on the top of the world. There is untold abundance, so great that a mere crumb can change your life forever. And all you have to do is be open to it. To not buy into some closed down wreck of a story that says "money and power and all the other demons are what should control your life". Listen with new ears. See with new eyes. Find someone or something thing that is bringing out the best in your faith in Jesus Christ and share that with the world. Come to the feast."

*Heaven's morning breaks and earth's vain shadows flee;
in life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.*

⁵ Skinner, 17.

⁶ Melissa Florer-Bixler, "Living by The Word: Reflections on the Lectionary [Sept 6, 2015]." *The Christian Century* 132, no. 18 (2015): 20.

⁷ Skinner, 20.

⁸ Catherine Owens, "'Hear, O Israel': Exegetical Blindness and Mark 7:31-37." *Sewanee Theological Review* 56, no. 3 (.2013), 251-252.