

We must be bold in our faith.

The harshness and visceral language Jesus use in this text are off putting. Calling the woman, a dog has always made me cringe. I considered preaching on the Old Testament instead. Yet, I am inspired by those with bold faith.

Martin Luther King Jr. pilgrimed alongside his wife to India. When he was introduced, the principal from an “untouchable” high school introduced him to the crowd as a “fellow untouchable.” This shocked King. He was a bit offended. Then he realized that the reality of the situation was true. In America, we too had created a Caste system where he was an untouchable. So, what did King do? He persisted in his faith and in bringing others to Jesus¹.

Martin Luther King Jr. was bold in his faith. He inspired many. We need to follow this example. We live in a time of fear. Of course, fear is also present in today’s Gospel.

Today Jesus encounters a Syrophenician woman. A question arises, who is the insider and who is the outsider. This woman is from a different culture and lacks the ability to have her daughter healed. The gentleman is from within Jesus’ culture. Listen again to the text, “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.” The woman is a disruption. It is like your neighbor’s music on a quiet night of retreat.

The gentleman is from an intentional ministry trip. Again, hear Mark’s words, “They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him.” The man is part of the intentional journey Jesus undertakes in the second part of Mark. He is brought to Jesus; others are petitioning on his behalf and Jesus is directly dealing with this gentleman. It is not an experience of overcoming obstacles.²

The Syrophenician woman had many obstacles. She only wanted her daughter healed and couldn’t do so without intruding upon Jesus. Recall that Jesus is wanting to be alone. Scholars believe he is likely on a sort of island, even though he is in dry land. It is an island of propriety in a sea of untouchables. Not unlike India or the racial tensions in our country, the ancient Near Eastern Culture where Jesus lived was full of boundaries based on race and culture. Jesus was a Jew in the land of gentiles. The woman broke down boundaries. Jesus uses what we hear is a racially based slur. But he does not tell her no. He tells her to wait. “Let the children be fed first.”³

This dance of inappropriate cultural relationships continues - neither knowing how to interact with others. She must stand up for herself at a time when, in either culture, this would have been inappropriate. Where is her husband? Should he not be interceding on her behalf? Could she not have been talking to one of the women in Jesus’ following? Yet, she does none of this. Instead, she is an advocate for herself. She clearly has a great faith in Christ’s healing powers.⁴

Another obstacle the woman must overcome is the history of her interaction with Jesus. The culture in which the woman and Jesus take place is oral, and everyone is a Master of

¹ This reference is from the book *Caste*, Wilkerson, Isabel. Fr. Roman recommended the book, and it accurately highlights the way in which our current caste systems have developed. It is also useful in imagining the class systems of Jesus’ time.

² C. Clifton Black. (2021) *Working Preacher*. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-23-2/commentary-on-mark-724-37-5>

³ Mark 7:27

⁴ C. Clifton Black. (2021) *Working Preacher*. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-23-2/commentary-on-mark-724-37-5>

History. Jesus may have been thinking about another bold woman: Jezebel who used her own culture to influence the power of the Israeli Monarchy, she used violence, she was killed.

As Jesus contemplates his time alone, is he remembering this fated interaction?⁵ If he is using this interaction, perhaps he is hoping the woman will be less bold in her request, more tamed and assimilate to his cultural standard of conduct.

Instead, the woman continues with breaking boundaries and responds to Jesus, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”⁶ Sometimes, our petitions to God, our requests require a catch, they require some additional moxie. I do not think this means Jesus does not know our hearts, rather that our hearts have an opportunity to further open and be bold before him. The woman is so bold that she doesn’t stop when it appears Jesus won’t heal her. She persists. She won’t take no for an answer, and Jesus is impressed with her. In fact, Jesus is so impressed he replies, “For saying that you may go--the demon has left your daughter.”

She has now broken through every obstacle and impressed Jesus with her boldness.

And then we have hearing that is opened. It is interesting that after the woman’s daughter: Jesus goes public again. I love this part of the story because it reminds me that we are in fact part of our relationship with God. That God invites our bold prayers.

Jesus travels back for this second part of the story, he goes to Decapolis toward the Sea of Galilee. Jesus is moved to travel. To teach. To heal. And this healing is extraordinary in its openness. He takes the man aside, spits on his hands and sticks them in the man’s ears. This is not a COVID friendly healing. There is no social distancing. And the results are immediate: we have ears opened. We have him speaking. We have a new member reintegrated into the community of Jesus’ time. This was a bold healing. The man began to proclaim and could do so with boldness.

This healing is socially lifted up, it is not a quiet affair. It is broadcast and the consensus is clear: Jesus is truly amazing.

So, what do we do with these texts?

We recognize our own call to justice and evangelism. They are not separate

In some ways, the healing of the Syrophenician Woman is an evangelical act. And in some ways, she is the evangelist. She goes to an uncomfortable place. She reaches out to find Jesus. Thus, the good news of Jesus’ healing is brought to a new place.

As a society, when evangelizing, we must be fair. We must be just. We must respect the dignity of every person, loving our neighbor as ourselves.⁷

We have a very serious responsibility to invite others into our community to better know Christ. I recognize that as Episcopalians this is a hard thing to do, we do not like talking about our faith, because some believe it is private. It is personal. Yet, I lift up to you this Syrophenician, this woman who was very uncomfortable, and how she sought the Good News of Christ.

We have a responsibility to invite all people. This includes our neighbors from where we live and those who live in the neighborhood outside this church. I have loved getting to know each of you. I told Fr. Roman and Sarah that once someone meets this community, they will instantly want to be a part of it. You are all very easy to love. And it has brought me great joy to meet friends each of you have brought to church. We just need to do more of this.

⁵ Swanson. Richard, W. (2005). *Provoking the Gospel of Mark*. Cleveland: Pilgrim. p.209

⁶ The idea of Breaking Boundaries is from the Brainwave Podcast for 2018 from Lewis. 18B. Mark 7:28 is the Bible quote.

⁷ Baptismal Covenant. *Book of Common Prayer* (1979). New York: Church Publishing.

And as a staff, as some of your leaders in the church, we are going to provide opportunities for invitation.

You are going to hear a great deal about evangelism and opening our doors in the days, weeks, and months ahead. It is going to start with a program called Invite, Welcome, Connect. This ministry provides an avenue to ask people to come into our church. We are going to have some key events, events that we already do well, where we invite guests. Angela Stengl and I are the head of the invite aspect of Invite, Welcome, Connect, and along with many other gifted individuals we are opening our Blessing of Animals to more people. St. Francis was very much about welcoming others. To prove this point, all you need to do is open the doors of Hope Center and go read in their library.

Martin Luther King Jr. inspired leaders after him, including Archbishop Desmond Tutu. He was Archbishop of South Africa during apartheid, extreme racial segregation. People were imprisoned, discriminated against, and murdered, yet he was persistent in his evangelistic faith. Despite all the names he was called, the slurs he endured, the persecution of people in his country based solely on the color of their skin: he was gracious and generous.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu is a man who believes in the goodness of all humankind.⁸ When explaining this persistent generosity, he noted that he gained a generous spirit from his parents, who were quite poor; his father was a teacher and they lived in a tiny house. Despite their lack of wealth, they always took in students who had too far to walk for school. They always shared.⁹ Later in life, he would share the good news of Christ with everyone from his political foes to his allies. I know nothing of Tutu's pain or of the pain of being discriminated against based on race.

What I do know is that this church has an abundance: abundance of love for each other, abundance of generosity, and abundance of understanding for those who make mistakes. God calls us to share our abundance with others. God calls us to be inspired by the Saints before us and make disciples today

Friends, I recognize we are in the time of COVID, and it is scary to think of large crowds. Yet our bold action could be simple. We could go across the room to say hi to a newcomer. We could remember their name in our prayers throughout the week.

We might ask a coworker or a someone on the outside of our friend circle to join us for worship. We might suggest to that lonely neighbor that we, at St. Dunstan's have a bold faith, a generous faith to share with them. Simple actions like this can make an outsider in our church feel at home. Their hearts could be changed by Jesus, partly because you boldly acted and welcomed.

Let us be inspired by the boldness of the Syrophenician woman. Let us remember the boldness of Martin Luther King Jr. May we boldly share the love of Christ. May we boldly open our hearts to our neighbors and build up God's kingdom. Amen.

⁸ Please see Desmond Tutu's book, *God has a Dream*. Also, Genesis 1:31 backs up the thesis that everyone is essentially good at their core.

⁹ Tutu, Desmond (2004). *Made for Goodness*. New York: Image Books. p.86