

Put Pride Aside

Mark 7: 24 – 30

(preached September 8, 2024)

People here in New England have a reputation for being independent. Generally speaking, we like to be self-sufficient. Asking for help does not come easily for many of us. How about you? How do you feel about asking for help? Do you like to be independent? Do you like to show a self-reliant face to the world, a face that says, “I can take care of myself?”

Or are you the kind of person who doesn’t mind asking when you need help? Maybe you have no problem asking for help when you need it. Maybe you’re like the young mother who received a telephone call one day. When the phone rang, she jumped up to answer it. “Hello?” she said. She heard a kind voice on the other end of the line, and was happy when she heard the voice asking, “How are you honey?”

As it happened, the young mother was having a tough day. She didn’t hold back. “Oh, Mother,” she said. “I’m having such a horrible day. The baby won’t eat, the washing machine broke down, I haven’t had a chance to go shopping, and besides all that I’ve just sprained my ankle and have to hobble around. On top of that, the house is a mess and I’m supposed to have people over for dinner tonight.”

Hearing all this, the other woman was filled with sympathy. “Oh, honey,” she said. “Sit down, relax, and close your eyes. I’ll come over and do your shopping. I’ll clean the house and cook your dinner for you. I’ll feed the baby, and I’ll call a repairman I know who’ll be at your house in no time to fix the washing machine. Now stop crying. I’ll do everything. In fact, I’ll even call Jack at the office and tell him he ought to come home and help for once.”

There was a pause on the other end of the line. “Jack?” said the distressed young woman. “Who is Jack?”

“Why, you know, Jack! Your husband!... Is this 284-1373?”

“...Uh, no... it’s 284-1376.”

There was another pause. Then the young woman spoke up. “Does this mean you won’t be coming over?”

Some of us are like that young mother. We don’t mind asking for help. We’re willing to ask for help when we’re in need. In our gospel passage for today, from the gospel of Mark, we find a woman who is also willing to ask for help. The woman Mark describes as a Syrophenician comes to Jesus, begging him to heal her daughter, who is plagued by an unclean spirit. (In those days, people often thought that unclean spirits or demons caused what we today would call mental illness.)

Mark doesn't tell us much about this woman. We don't even know her name. All we know is that she is desperate to find help for her daughter. When she sees Jesus walking into her town, she runs up to him and cries, "Lord, help me! My daughter is suffering terribly."

People listening to this story in Jesus' day would have known from the get-go that this woman comes from a very different world from Jesus. She doesn't belong to Jesus' community, the Jewish people. She's a Syrophenician, which means she's a gentile. In her religion, she worships pagan gods, idols that Jews have long been forbidden to worship. She follows rituals that Jews find strange, even offensive. She feeds her family foods no self-respecting Jew would eat.

Jesus doesn't consider Syrophenicians like this woman to be part of his mission. When she bows down at his feet, and begs him to help her, he puts her off. He says, "Let the children be fed first, for it isn't fair to take the children's food and give it to the dogs." Harsh words.

It helps to have a little background here: Jesus is speaking in metaphors. The children he refers to are the Jewish people, the people he has been ministering to until now, his people. And the dogs...well, the dogs are the gentiles, the people who aren't Jewish. People like the woman kneeling before him.

Even if we don't take his words literally, this doesn't sound like the Jesus we know. He seems to be saying that, if he helps her, his ministry will be going to the dogs. And in those days dogs were not the cuddly companions we know and love today. In those days to call someone a dog was a serious insult.

Does this sound like the kind and gentle Jesus we have heard, the one who proclaims the good news of the Kingdom of God, the kingdom of goodness and love? Is this the Jesus who shared meals with outcasts and healed people no one else would touch? What's going on here?

At the beginning of this passage, Mark is careful to tell us that Jesus has journeyed outside Jewish territory. He has come to the region of Tyre, which today is the country of Lebanon. Mark doesn't tell us the reason for the trip, but it's not hard to imagine that Jesus went to that seaside town for a vacation. He might well have needed a break.

In Galilee, his ministry was moving at a hectic pace. Everywhere he went, crowds followed him, asking for miracles. The Pharisees, the leaders of the religious establishment, took every opportunity to badger him, trying to trap him in a debate about religious laws. Even the disciples were bugging him all the time, asking him to explain his parables. As he made the trip to the region of Tyre, he might well have been looking forward to some rest and relaxation, some time to reflect and walk on the beach.

But no sooner has Jesus found a quiet place to stay, a place where he hopes that no one will know him, than this woman finds him. Her behavior is outrageous for that time. She comes in and kneels at his feet. Then, in an incredibly forward way, she, a woman, starts the conversation! It was unheard of in those days for a decent woman to speak directly to a man she didn't know. Yet this woman makes the first move; she approaches Jesus; she's the one to speak first. "Please, sir, my daughter is tormented by a terrible demon. The whole family is at our wits' end. Please heal her."

No wonder Jesus is caught off-guard. No wonder his initial reaction is a rebuff. No wonder he puts her off by saying, "It's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

I think, if I had been that woman, I would have given up at that point. How could I stand to be insulted in that way? My pride would have been seriously wounded, and I would have gone off in a huff. But this woman doesn't do that. She couldn't care less about maintaining her pride. Without missing a beat, she says, "Yes, Lord, but even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." She's so determined that her daughter be healed that, she puts pride aside. If the great healer compares her to a dog, so be it. Her reputation may be ruined, but if that's what it takes to get Jesus' help, she's OK with it.

What gives her that persistence, that determination to ask Jesus? Maybe she's convinced that Jesus will help because she's heard of his miracles. Travelers passing through her town on their way from Galilee have told of his amazing healings. Maybe she's heard that he is a friend to women. Not many men were that kind of a friend to women in those days.

Or maybe she's heard about his preaching. Friends have told her that he encourages his followers by saying, "Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. So she asks; she seeks. She says, "You have a good point, Lord, about that bread going to the dogs. But even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

And Jesus responds, "For saying that, you can go – your daughter had been healed."

What makes Jesus change his mind this way? It may be because he sees that she's determined to put pride aside. That determination makes a strong impression on him. Her determination is so great, that it seems to drive out any doubt he might have had. She may be strange to him, with odd ways of dressing and odd beliefs, but her determination moves Jesus from annoyance to willingness to help. She has put pride aside, and that makes him change his mind.

A few months ago, a documentary on Netflix told the story of the making of the hit recording "We Are the World." The recording of "We Are the World" made millions of dollars for aid in Africa. The year was 1985 and to create the recording, the artists Diana Ross, Kenny Rogers, Michael Jackson, Bruce Springsteen, Bob Dylan and

other big names came together in a studio on a single night. They were brought together by a man named Quincy Jones, who is one of the most respected people in the world of entertainment. He's a composer, promoter, performer, producer, and director: truly a man of many talents.

But perhaps Quincy Jones's greatest talent is bringing together superstars of the entertainment industry: famous artists who are not generally known for their humility. He got them to work together as a team. How did he do this? That night, at the entrance to the recording studio, he posted a sign that said, "Check your ego at the door!"

That's what the Syrophonecian woman did. When she came to Jesus, begging him to heal her daughter, she checked her ego at the door. She put pride aside, and in putting pride aside she opened the way for her daughter to be healed.

Long ago, in a city far from here, a woman refused to take no for an answer. In her time, she might have been called uppity, disrespectful, or worse. But she put aside any fear of losing her reputation. She refused to let pride get in the way of the healing she knew Jesus could give.

Sometimes you and I, like that woman, may long for healing, in ourselves or someone else. And sometimes it may open a way for healing if we put pride aside. May God give us the grace to put pride aside, that we might be part of God's holy work of healing the world.

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Pentecost 16