

19th Sunday After Pentecost

September 30, 2018

Series: We Are One

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**Exodus 32:9-11a, 12-14**

**Mark 7:24-30**

### **But She Answered Him**

“But she answered him, ‘Sir even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.’” -- Mark 7:28



“The one with the crumby dog” by Ally Barrett, contemporary

Today we are in the Gospel of Mark, chapter 7. Jesus has been teaching and healing throughout the Jewish communities in Galilee. In chapter 5 he brings a small girl back to life. In chapter 6 he learns of the brutal death of John the Baptist, walks on water, feeds 5000 and tangles with the local authorities. Finally, at the end of chapter 7 he takes a long- needed break and travels north to a spot on the Mediterranean Sea. This is Mark 7:24-30.

*From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. 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. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin. 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.” Then he said to her, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.” So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.*

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Gracious God, help us receive this word you offer. Send your spirit to rest upon us, we pray. Help us to be steadfast in our hearing, in our speaking, in our believing and in our living. Amen.

There is a scene I love in the classic television show M\*A\*S\*H. You know that M\*A\*S\*H was and is the greatest television show of all time, right? Just so that there can be no question about that! Set in 1950’s Korea, during the US involvement in the Korean War, this scene has some wounded civilians arriving at the Mobile Army Surgical Hospital. The nurses and doctors are rushing to order the patients, according to the severity of their injuries, when a woman in a fine car pulls up demanding medical attention for her son.<sup>i</sup>

(film clip...Hawkeye sizes her up and doesn't want to leave his patient, who has a broken femur, to tend to this privileged woman's relative. He is ordered to go with her, and during the car ride, he speaks disdainfully to her about her status and wealth. The woman comments about how hard it is to wait when a person you love is in pain. They pull up to a modest house and walk in to a room where an older woman is lying in bed writhing in pain.)

Did you hear what she said? "When someone you love is in pain it is very hard to wait." So true. The woman in the fine car turned out to be one of the good guys, taking refugees into her home and providing for orphans. Her mother is desperately ill. She is willing to go to any length necessary to get help for her mother, like Denzel Washington's character in *John Q*, and Carmen Diaz in *My Sister's Keeper*. There are many other stories like this one about a woman who heard about Jesus, the Savior. She sought him out while he was visiting the Gentile region of Tyre.

She was breaking the law by approaching him this way and defying every accepted social convention. Rabbis in Jesus' time didn't speak to women who were not their wives. In fact, some closed their eyes as they walked down the street to avoid accidentally looking at a woman. Jesus broke those rules on a regular basis, though I doubt the Syrophenician woman knew it. Maybe she did. What she certainly knew was that he was a healer. Her daughter was seriously ill, and she was willing to do absolutely anything to get her daughter the help she needed.

In Matthew's version of the story,<sup>ii</sup> she came near him and began shouting at him. Jesus initially ignored her, which is tough to read, but that's what happened. It's not surprising, I guess. Sometimes it feels like no one hears the women, no one believes the women, not even the Savior. But maybe that wasn't the problem. Maybe it wasn't a gender problem at all. In verse 24 Mark says that Jesus had "entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there." As much as we don't like to think about it, Jesus got tired. He felt the strain of the world's need.

Nevertheless she persisted. Wouldn't you? When someone you love is in pain, it is very hard to wait. So the Syrophenician woman came to Jesus and bowed down at his feet; it is a very humble posture. Then Jesus did the same thing Hawkeye did in the clip, he got all snarky with her. He said, "They're all in pain, lady. You can't cut in line." What's worse, at least in terms of our sensibilities, he said it using a racial slur. Jews often referred to Gentiles as "dogs," and it wasn't a compliment. He said, "It's not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." Ouch.

Maybe – hopefully in this case – Jesus was joking around with her; it's hard to tell in the Greek. The word for dog here actually means "little dog" or "puppy," but that isn't much help. He's referred to her ethnicity and his gifts of mercy, and said she doesn't deserve them.

Nevertheless she persisted. I really like this lady – she's quick. She takes the colorful insult and flings it right back at him. Respectfully, of course, but she does. She says, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." It's true! When our

children were small, our Golden Retriever refused to let a crumb from their highchairs ever hit the floor. She caught them in midair. That's all this woman is asking – a crumb, just a morsel of Jesus' blessing, not the whole loaf, not even a slice, just a crumb.

We, who have so much, easily forget the enormous impact of crumbs. Small blessings literally mean life, survival to those who have very little, those who are desperate and in pain. For example, did you know that Woods Church has 2 orphanages in Africa, in Malawi? They are not entirely ours of course, but we are a major partner in Ministry of Hope. This very impactful feeding and medical ministry has crisis nurseries in Mzuzu and Lilongwe, Malawi. Tiny lives are saved there every day. Lives like these. This is possible because you give to Woods.



Every year you provide, tens of thousands of dollars in support – for food, housing, education, and loving care. We send volunteers. Here are Woods members, Katie and Lauren Lohff with two of the children in 2017. Lauren returned as an intern this past summer. Woods' presence means hope for these little ones in a region devastated by drought, HIV, and other disasters. Nevertheless they persist.



wa... wa... give, give, give, give." This is why. When someone you love is in pain it is very hard to wait.

I know that sometimes I sound like a broken record. "Give! Wa ... wa... wa...give, wa...



Some people think what they have to give isn't much, that it's only crumbs, they think. Just crumbs. Listen: even the little you can give means life for these children.

We drive SUVs, shop in Superstores, and go to events in giant arenas and stadiums, and after a while, we start to believe that everything has to be enormous to be worthwhile. But it isn't true. Even a small amount of blessing transforms lives like these!

I'm certain Jesus knew that. I'm not sure whether he finally rewards the Syrophenician woman's faith or her tenacity. They are both important and very close to the same thing. Without a solid faith, she wouldn't have hung in there as she did, without the unconditional, relentless love of a parent she might not have persisted the way she did.

You know, all that is not un-doglike. When you stop and think about it -- dogs are among the most perfect of God's creatures. Now, I know, calling someone a dog is an insult today just as it was in Jesus' day, but we do cherish our canine friends, don't we? And for good reason. A dog's persistent devotion is nearly perfect. For a long time my mother had a prayer tacked to her refrigerator that said, "Lord, please make me the kind of person my dog thinks I am."



Our dogs live quite well. Maybe this woman did too. I'm not sure why I have always thought of her as a poor woman, but I have, until this week when I read something by Duke Divinity School's Joel Marcus.<sup>iii</sup> He pointed out that the source of a lot of the bad blood between the Galileans and the Tyrians was that most of the farm produce grown in Galilee wound up on the tables of wealthy people in Tyre, while the peasants of Galilee went hungry. Remembering that makes Jesus' words seem more compassionate.

Whether she was rich or poor, privileged or oppressed, nevertheless, she persisted. She managed to wrestle a blessing from Jesus. In that way she was like Abraham, Moses, David, Jeremiah, Hezekiah and Mary, she argued with God. She answered back, and that's okay, in fact it's important. She gave us a valuable lesson about courage and perseverance. This lady wasn't Jewish, but she had chutzpah. You know what that is, right? Chutzpah is a Yiddish word that means audacity, cheek, nerve.

She was persistent, because when someone you love is in pain it is very hard to wait.

God shows that same kind of persistence with us, therefore we need to be that persistent with God and with each other.

In the way Abraham and Sarah moved persistently toward God's dream for them, we need to be resolute in the way we trust God's call.

In the way Joseph persistently turned toward his brothers in forgiveness, we need to relentlessly forgive one another.

In the way Ruth, the Gentile, moved toward Bethlehem with persistent faith in the God, who loves the outsider, we need to be relentless in the way we insist on welcoming the stranger and caring for the refugee.

In fact the whole story of the Bible is about persistence in faith, God's persistent belief in flawed humanity, and the unyielding faith of men and women like the Syrophenician woman who never, never, never, give up.

That relentless love is the basis of our unity, and it cannot be taken from us, though our national unity has taken quite a beating this week. We need each other, now, more than ever. We need to persistently LISTEN to one another. We have to relentlessly pursue the unity of our faith in the face of evil's relentless efforts to tear us apart.

That persistent love is a holy thing. It is the gift of God to the church; the people John Calvin called "the mother of all who have God as their father."<sup>iv</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> M\*A\*S\*H, season 6, episode 8

<sup>ii</sup> Matthew 15:21-28

<sup>iii</sup> Joel Marcus, *Mark 1-8 The Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries*, Yale University Press, 2002, 469

<sup>iv</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, chapter 1