The Woman Who Changed Jesus' Mind

Mark 7: 24 – 30

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A crumby story

The story of the Syrophoenician woman who told Jesus about dogs that get to eat crumbs that fall from the table is kind of a crummy story, don't you think? It's not the breadcrumbs that irritate me, but the crummy response Jesus gives to her. After all of this ministry I've had of talking about inclusiveness, the last thing I need is a story about Jesus acting like a jerk to some poor woman who just wants her kid healed. Whose idea was it to even put this in the Bible?

Like it or not, it's in there, and it's up to us to get all the nourishment we can from its crumbs.

The Setting

Here's a quick recap: Jesus is suffering compassion fatigue. The gospel of Mark paints a picture of huge crowds of people pressing on Jesus to meet their needs. It must have been overwhelming, like waking up every morning to stand in front of a firehose. So, he slips away to recharge. He travels to non-Jewish territory and finds a house where he can hide.

But he's discovered. A woman bursts through the door falls at Jesus' feet and begs Jesus to heal her daughter. She's a foreigner, worships another God, intrudes where she's not wanted and makes demands. The disciples swarm to protect Jesus and urge him to send her away.

Saving everyone is not my job

Until now, Jesus treated people with grace when they interrupted him, such as the time the hemorrhaging woman touched his clothes to get healed and when he tried to teach a lesson but some dudes cut a hole in the roof of the house and lowered a paralytic man for Jesus to heal. He welcomed the interrupters and praised them for their faith.

But this time, Jesus breaks character. He follows the disciple's advice and shoos her away. "I came to save the lost sheep of Israel." Essentially, he said, "That's not *my* job. My job description is to be the Jewish Messiah. I don't have the bandwidth to help everybody." It would have been understandable if he had stopped there.

But he goes further, "It is not right to give what is holy to the dogs." Ouch. Yeah, he's insulting this woman and her child by calling them dogs. Back then, most people didn't have warm, fuzzy feelings about dogs as family members but as

scavengers prowling the streets, annoying everyone with nighttime barking. If you've ever been to villages in developing nations, you get the idea. Why would Jesus say such an un-Jesus like thing?

This is a test, only a test?
People have been wrestling with this question for 2,000 years and have floated various possibilities. Early Protestant reformers tried to wave away the damage, arguing that the word used for dog meant a small dog not some big angry mongrel. As if the problem were the size of the cur not the dehumanizing slur. The most common approach is to say that we know Jesus was kind and compassionate so this was just a test of her faith. Often, people say that just as God tested Abraham and Job, sometimes we have to prove our faith before God unlocks the blessings intended for us.

An object lesson?
He always intended to heal the daughter. Maybe he said it with a wink, inviting her to persist and come back at him to make a point to the disciples who found reasons to dismiss her needs. He wasn't really being mean, he sensed this woman wasn't going to take no for an answer and he could use that to make a point. The disciples needed to learn not to be so exclusive, racist, stingy. Like the song says, in this very room there is quite enough love, quite enough power for all of us. Jesus acted in this way because he wanted us to learn.

Reinforcing teachings about persistence?
Another way of dealing with the story is to say Jesus was underscoring a parable he told about a widow who kept coming to a judge in the middle of the night demanding justice. Her persistence is an act of faith; we all need to learn not to give up too quickly. God will bring justice and reconciliation between divided people, but it takes persistence. It takes people who won't take "no" for an answer. It takes people who won't let cultural conventions and stereotypes stop them for demanding what is right. Just because it doesn't come immediately doesn't mean God doesn't care. We are called to be persistent in our prayers. Jesus taught us to pray always and not lose heart.

Maybe you've given up too easily on something and this story can remind you there is enough for you--there is grace for you, love for you, a community of care for you. The crumbs of mercy are given for you and whenever we have communion and tear a piece of bread off, we are reminded of that fact.

A warning about what happens when you don't take care of yourself?
Another way of looking at the passage is to see it as a big yellow warning sign. We see the fully human side of Jesus and say the lesson is a reminder that when we get too depleted or haven't been caring for ourselves as we ought, we lash out in out-of-character ways. None of us are immune, not even Jesus. So, the question the

passage asks of us is how are you taking care of yourself, your spirit? Coming to church today is a great way of tending to this. You're off to a good start this week!

Maybe Jesus did change his mind.
I am drawn to the interpretation that this story marks a turning point in Jesus' ministry. Yes, I identify with the human aspect—the need to get away, the compassion fatigue—I get all of that. Maybe Jesus just had a human moment.

But the real star of the show is the woman. She doesn't back down. She comes back at Jesus. Okay, the children of Israel are to be fed first. That is what you've been doing—going to Jewish communities to spread your message. But there is enough for all; even the dogs get the crumbs that fall from the table. Agitate. What was his expression?
Jesus is persuaded, and from this point on in Mark, we see him performing the same miracles, underscoring the same lessons in both Gentile and Jewish territories. Don't you just love it when a woman wins a debate?

In the gospels, we see Jesus wipe the floor with all the male heavy-weight theologians in debates. But along comes this mother with her need and she reminds Jesus of the core principles he was always about--God's love and grace and challenges him to expand his thinking, his notion of his job description. And Jesus does the unthinkable. In that culture, you are not going to back down when some crying mother makes demands on you. You stand your ground; don't get humiliated. The Washington Post has a story today about the Taliban cracking down on women speaking in public and looking at men who are not relatives. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/09/15/taliban-afghanistan-laws-women-rights/

But Jesus shows us not to get caught up in that. Don't get so caught up in your pride that you miss growth opportunities.

The importance of changing your mind and making amends.
Some people see it as a weakness to change one's mind. Politicians excoriate one another for being flip-floppers. But there is a difference between changing positions because of what's popular and having a change of heart because of what is right. Jesus shows us to be open and never hold on too tightly to something that blinds us to the bigger picture.

I've changed my mind a bunch over the years, especially when it comes to who is included in God's grace. Every time, I'm challenged to widen the circle until there is no circle of insiders and outsiders.

It's not enough to hear these words and nod in agreement—what will you do with them? Is there someone in your life who's been waiting for your compassion and

willingness to see them with fresh eyes? This week, I challenge you to act. Send a message to someone you've dismissed, apologize for being wrong, or reach out to someone in need. Make space in your heart for love to break through, and let it reshape how you live.

Just as a flower blossoms when nourished, our hearts bloom when we allow love to break through. What will you do to nourish the change Jesus calls you to?