**Who is *This* Jesus?**

A meditation on Mark 7: 24 – 35

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If you weren’t with us when we were only worshiping virtually, you wouldn’t know that each week we had three canines in attendance. Week in and week out, our “doggy deacons” Neville, Gillie’s faithful companion, Sally, our original office dog (humans: Leslie & Sherry), and Lily, my English Bulldog, kept us company during those long months of an empty Sunday morning sanctuary. Lily, when she wasn’t snoring loudly through the sermon (She keeps me humble!), made it very clear that she was here for two reasons: belly rubs from any one of the few humans in attendance, and communion. You would think we kept steak on the communion table – the joy and longing modeled by these dogs as they wait for communion – it’s inspiring. Lily often slept under the communion table during worship – not a bad strategy – she wasn’t going to let that meal go by.  She got the timing down, and was not amused if the sermon went ever so slightly longer than usual, delaying the receiving of the communion bread. As I have been working with today’s text, she let me know that she isn’t a big fan of the “crumbs are for the dogs” theology. I tried to explain that dogs weren’t as beloved as they are now, something she couldn’t get her head around. However, she quickly squirreled and asked me to please  convey her gratitude to the Congregational Care committee for providing cookies after church.

Jesus is on the move. He has possibly left his disciples behind there, as well. The stories leading up to today’s events are a glimpse into the stress and frustration with which Jesus lived. He has been debating with the legal experts from Jerusalem over what makes a person clean or unclean. Jesus reminds them that what goes into a person does not make them unclean, but rather what comes from the human heart, and his disciples were baffled by this. He, in turn was baffled by their lack of understanding, so after saying these things, he seems to be in need of some “down time,” away from all these people, experts and disciples alike. Away from their questioning and criticism. So, he walked the long road to the seacoast town of Tyre and slipped into “a house” to be alone.

But even there he cannot be alone. This is no retreat for Jesus. A woman comes to the door. A desperate woman comes to the door. A Greek woman, who has heard about this Jewish rabbi from Nazareth, has beaten everyone to his door. This woman falls at his feet to beg for mercy and healing for her young child. It must have been an agonizing sight, and we would expect the Jesus we think we know to take her by the hand, lift her to her feet, look compassionately into her face and tell her, “Your faith has made her well. Go in peace.”

But this Jesus doesn’t turn from the plate of food he before him, a meal he needs after his travels. He doesn’t look at her or place his hand on her shoulder. He picks up a piece of flatbread, bread so recently blessed, and as she looks up at him, he says, “*we don’t take the bread for the children and throw it to the dogs*.” She is on the ground at his feet, on her hands and knees, begging like a dog.

What Jesus is this, and what did someone do with *our* Jesus?  Our Jesus welcomes everyone, our Jesus teaches about a realm in which ritual falls before compassion, and hierarchies of power are deconstructed so that the last may be first. Our Jesus calls people out on hypocrisy. So who is this?

Was Jesus simply too exhausted to care? Worn down by the critique and inability of his disciples to understand his teachings? Was he physically, mentally, spiritually depleted? Maybe…but we have seen Jesus tired before and he didn’t verbally abuse anyone.

Was Jesus testing her, prompting her to debate with him before healing his daughter? The theological bantering that was common in Jewish tradition? Maybe, but he didn’t typically demonstrate such an insensitivity to someone’s pain. It’s one thing to debate with a group at the synagogue or marketplace, or around a well, but to engage in theological discussion with someone clinging to your feet and begging for mercy for their child seems not so much like Jesus.

Maybe she was there to teach him something, to remind him of the words he had so recently spoken to his disciples, “It’s from the inside, from the human heart, that evil thoughts come: “envy, insults, arrogance, and foolishness.” Maybe she was there to call him on his hypocrisy, and if so, then he allowed himself to be schooled.

Was she also there to challenge him to bring God’s salvation to all people, and not simply the Jews? She wasn’t the first non-Jew who had come for healing, so he has already practiced the wideness of God’s mercy. Nd, we should note, he is the outsider in this story – she is in her hometown.

If it's not any of these things, then why would he speak to her in this way?

A fresher interpretation is this: Tyre is a thriving seaport. It is entirely possible that this mother “may be a wealthy, entitled woman, a woman who has everything except a way to heal her daughter. Jesus is the one who is a poor member of a minority group.”[[i]](https://d.docs.live.net/ae7f2b38dbfc5f2e/Documents/Who%20is%20This%20Jesus%20%281%29.docx%22%20%5Cl%20%22_edn1)  If we look at it this way, we see a different power structure than if we use the lens through which we typically read scripture. In this case, we may not be seeing a powerless woman (as was often the case), but a very powerful, though despairing one. In this light we hear Jesus saying, “it is not good to take poor people’s food and throw it to the rich Gentiles in the city.”[[ii]](https://d.docs.live.net/ae7f2b38dbfc5f2e/Documents/Who%20is%20This%20Jesus%20%281%29.docx%22%20%5Cl%20%22_edn2)

Now as Jesu equates her and her daughter with dogs, the dogs are no longer scavengers scrounging for crumbs but predators ready to pounce. Can you see that? In this interpretation, Jesus is saying to her, the impoverished Jewish people receive the bread first. He doesn’t say they are the only ones to receive bread, but that they receive it first. The first shall be last and the last shall be first. Not because they are Jewish, but because they are poor. He calls her out on her privilege. He is so weary of witnessing the suffering of God’s people. He sees the Roman oppression, how it trickles down from Tyre to Nazareth. She, like so many of us, benefits from economic privileges unknown to so many others. She has a home – her daughter is there waiting for her – Jesus is in a borrowed one. One in Tyre today, another one somewhere else tomorrow. She has economic security; he is dependent from one day to the next upon the compassion of others. He does not know where his next meal is coming from.

To his honest, though harsh response, she says, “Lord,” not to be obsequious, but to be respectful. “Lord, the doges get the crumbs from under the children’s table.” Contained within these words is her recognition and acceptance of what he has said. She knows that the crumbs will be enough for her daughter to be healed, that the crumbs will not deprive another of what they need. To this he says, “Good answer,” which could also be interpreted as “good teaching,” “good logos.” Who needed to learn? If we accept this perspective on the text, then she needed to learn. She needed to be opened to the realities of her privilege, something she may not have considered before that day. As pastor and author Carlos A. Rodríguez writes, “When we’re not hungry for justice, it’s usually because we’re too full with privilege.”[[iii]](https://d.docs.live.net/ae7f2b38dbfc5f2e/Documents/Who%20is%20This%20Jesus%20%281%29.docx%22%20%5Cl%20%22_edn3) Finding herself on the other side of that equation, she gains new awareness.

Being opened is a theme of these stories, as Jesus next encounters someone whose speech is limited and whose ears do not function. Unlike the previous story, in which Jesus healed from a distance, Jesus has a total hand-on approach. But before he does anything, he takes this person away from the crowd. He isn’t going to put on a show for people. The work he will do will be for this individual, not so that he can prove anything to anyone. This time, he puts his fingers in the man’s ears, he spits and touches the man’s tongue, and he says to him, “be opened.” Here’s another reason to withdraw from the crowds. Imagine being deaf and suddenly hearing. The noise would be overwhelming, even disturbing. Jesus gently welcomes this person into a different way of experiencing the world.

When the people heard what Jesus had done, they said, “he does all things well,” They were right. HE does the truth telling well, as in the first story. And can we all agree that truth telling isn’t fun? It’s much easier to avoid difficult conversations than to engage in them. It is much more difficult to say something that might cause someone distress even if you believe they need to hear it.

Jesus wouldn’t have enjoyed causing stress to the mother in need, and we can be assured that regardless of how she might have responded, he would have healed her daughter. He lives truth well, and  he lives compassion well, too. Jesus does the unsettling justice work of naming privilege, and he does the hopeful justice work of restoration. He opens people up to what they need to learn. The pairing of these two stories connects us back to the prophet Isaiah.

Say to those who are panicking: “Be strong!” Don’t fear! Here is your God, coming with vengeance; with divine retribution God will come to save you…the ears of the deaf will be cleared…and the tongue of the speechless will sing.”

Those words, “vengeance” and “retribution” need not frighten us, even though we might not like their implications. When God comes with vengeance and retribution it is toward injustices and hypocrisies. It is not the divine retribution of destroying people, but of dismantling systems that imprison, abuse and enslave us. It is the compassionate justice work to which we are called. God comes to save us all, renew us all, redeem us all, but let us make no mistake: the last shall be first. Thanks be to God. Amen.

[[i]](https://d.docs.live.net/ae7f2b38dbfc5f2e/Documents/Who%20is%20This%20Jesus%20%281%29.docx%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ednref1) Ashley Wilcox, *The Women’s Lectionary*, (Louisville, KY, Westminster John Knox Press, 2021), p. 53.

[[ii]](https://d.docs.live.net/ae7f2b38dbfc5f2e/Documents/Who%20is%20This%20Jesus%20%281%29.docx%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ednref2) Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Teaching, Year B, Vol. 3, (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2021), p. 298, Leeanne Van Dyk referencing John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington in *Gospel of Mark* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005), p. 75.

[[iii]](https://d.docs.live.net/ae7f2b38dbfc5f2e/Documents/Who%20is%20This%20Jesus%20%281%29.docx%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ednref3) Carlos A. Rodríguez@happySonship

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