

“To Trust God in Desperate Times”

Mark 7:24-30; Matthew 15:21-28

I do not imagine there is a parent among us who would disagree, that the hardest thing to watch is your child when they are ill or been hurt or despondent and you cannot do anything about it. Other than pray and trust God to work. We say that as if it is a last resort when we know it should not be. As we remember and honour mothers today, I want us to sit in the corner of the house in ancient Tyre and watch through the lens of Scripture the pain of a desperate mother who is praying – pleading - with Jesus to heal her daughter and who initially appears to have a lack of sympathy.

In Mark 7/Matt 15 we see Jesus travelling away from Capernaum and the Sea of Galilee, north west to Gentile country, specifically Tyre and Sidon, the area known as Phoenicia. Today it is Lebanon. While Tyre was closer geographically to Nazareth (Jesus’ home town) than Jerusalem, it was as socially and spiritually distant from Israel as Lebanon and Syria is from Israel today. Usually this was not friendly territory but they lived in relative peace in Jesus’ day because Rome was in charge of everybody.

To get an understanding about how radical this was to do in Jesus’ day, one has to understand the background of Tyre and Sidon. The two cities are often names together because they were so important to the Phoenicians. Both cities were port cities along the coast, which meant they were trade centers. Anything important that was imported or exported came through the Mediterranean coast. So these two cities were prosperous.

In the days of David and Solomon, the countries were at peace with each other. Trade went back and forth. The king of Tyre traded with Solomon sending him cedar from Lebanon to build the temple. Unfortunately, that peace did not last long once Solomon died. However, the countries were only at peace because of marriage alliances. The most famous marriage alliance was when King Ahab married Jezebel. In case we forgot how wicked these two were here’s how Ahab is introduced in 1 Kings 16,

²⁹ Now Ahab the son of Omri became king over Israel in the thirty-eighth year of Asa king of Judah, and Ahab the son of Omri reigned over Israel in Samaria twenty-two years. ³⁰ Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the LORD more than all who were before him.

³¹ It came about, as though it had been a trivial thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, that he married Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and went to serve Baal and worshiped him. ³² So he erected an altar for Baal in the house of Baal which he built in Samaria. ³³ Ahab also made the Asherah. Thus Ahab did more to provoke the LORD God of Israel than all the kings of Israel who were before him.

As Jesus was leading the disciples through Tyre and Sidon, we have to understand that to a Jew, Tyre and Sidon are associated with Ahab and Jezebel. Their reputation was that of being rich and godless. Jesus left Galilee to get away from the religious leaders who, we read in the beginning of the chapters, came all the way from Jerusalem to confront Jesus about His disciples not washing their hands according to their traditions, which they equated as Scripture. Jesus pointed out their error and explained to His disciples that it’s not what is outside that makes one unclean but what comes out of a person; the wicked thoughts and attitudes. Which the disciples do not fully understand and they are worried that Jesus insulted the Pharisees!

When we understand how Mark and Matthew have carefully crafted these episodes through the Spirit, you could almost insert in brackets before 7:24 (speaking of unclean ²⁴ *Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret.*

The disciples would have been very uncomfortable. Going through Samaria was bad enough, but staying in a house in Tyre! What was Jesus thinking? Jesus was thinking His disciples need to learn about what is unclean and what is not.

The woman hears Jesus is there and “immediately came and fell at His feet”. In case we’re wondering how she even knew about Jesus we need to go back to Mark 3:7

⁷ *Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the lake, and a large crowd from Galilee followed. ⁸ When they heard all he was doing, many people came to him from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, and the regions across the Jordan and around Tyre and Sidon.*

Word about Jesus the miracle maker travelled fast and people in Tyre and Sidon were aware of the Jewish rabbi who could do miracles. He tried to avoid the crowds “*but He could not escape notice.*” This woman knew of Jesus and about the Hebrew Scripture for she addresses Jesus as ‘Son of David’. In addition, she comes right away for her daughter’s sake.

Who was she? What was her name? Was it her own sin of pagan worship that resulted in her daughter being possessed by a demon? We don’t know any of this but Jesus did. And that’s a good reminder to all of us that,

Jesus Knows Your Name and Your Pain **(7:24-26)**

While Jesus may appear to ignore the woman, we can be sure that this is the whole reason why He came there. Even though we do not know her name or her daughter, Jesus knew exactly what was going on before she even showed up. That is true for us also. Jesus knows us completely. He knows our pain. He can even empathize with us according to Heb. 4:15

¹⁵ *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. ¹⁶ Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*

Unlike the pagan gods that the world worshipped who did not live, could not talk and therefore could not relate to you, Jesus can. This is why He was so approachable. He was real but He was also God. And He could perform miracles.

While we can’t perform miracles, we are the next thing to people seeing Jesus. Jesus’ followers are to express the same empathy and compassion that Jesus did. Jesus intentionally went to Tyre and other

Uncomfortable places (7:24; 17:51)

There were many places Jesus went that the disciples were not comfortable with and would not have went had Jesus not led them. If we are to reach out and be the hands and feet of Jesus to

people in pain, we have to be willing at times to go to uncomfortable places. It could be as close as your neighbour or as far away in some foreign country. It could be a relative you know well or a perfect stranger. It could be to a rich godless person or a poor homeless person. It could be a person who's political or spiritual or moral view is the exact opposite of yours, and who may look like they have it altogether, but down in their soul they have pain. And they need Jesus. And Jesus left and gave us the task of being His hands and feet to the world.

We see here that Jesus

Cares for the outcasts (7:24; 15:21-23)

Mark identifies her as a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia emphasizing her as a Gentile. Matthew identifies her as a Canaanite, emphasizing the spiritual historical connection to Israel's past. The Israelites failed to wipe out the Canaanites during the reign of Joshua and the Judges, yet God in His mercy spared some to save some. To Israel, Gentiles like the Canaanites were the outcasts, the rejected, and the enemy. But Jesus is teaching them that God is gracious and is reaching out to all the unclean of the world.

Jesus has just argued with the Pharisees who in their self-righteousness felt they were the true worshippers of God. Yet Jesus calls them hypocrites because they only keep laws to make themselves look good on the outside. They even twist their traditions to make it sound like they are so holy they can't look after their own parents. Jesus points out they are disobeying the commandments by neglecting to care for their parents. Then Jesus explains to the disciples that food in itself is not unclean (expanding their minds beyond the legalistic requirements of the law); it's the heart that is unclean. And to illustrate that God is more concerned with hearts than food and clean hands, Jesus goes to the land of Jezebel and finds a Canaanite who has greater faith than the disciples do. And

He accepts all who confess Him as Lord (15:22; 7:28)

In Matthew's gospel, (whose original audience was mostly Jewish), she approaches Jesus and calls him 'Lord, Son of David'. She has a good understanding of the Old Testament and from hearing about Jesus doing miracles elsewhere she believed that He was the Messiah. Mark's audience was Gentile so Mark only records her as addressing Jesus as Lord, something some commentators feels wasn't Messianic but only a term of respect. Except that she is the only individual in Mark's gospel who calls him Lord. She believed Jesus was the Messiah who alone had the power from God to defeat the power of Satan. And Jesus will say she had great faith.

We are too quick to judge people who are the outcasts of our society or are rich and godless or poor and homeless or those we're uncomfortable to speak with, as those who would not confess Jesus as Lord. It is not our job to judge their hearts. God knows their hearts. Everyone has pain. Everyone has disappointments. Everyone feels unworthy or a failure even if they don't show it. Let's pray and ask God to lead us to those He would have us minister to with truth and grace, even if it means in uncomfortable places and to the outcasts of our world.

As the woman kept begging (continually), she gets no response from Jesus. The disciples beg Jesus to send her away. Before Jesus provides healing, He engages her in a little riddle or parable before finally healing her daughter. Why this delay? Jesus knew her heart but the disciples didn't and they needed to see what real faith looked like. What we need to take from this is that

Jesus May Delay Answering our Prayers to test our Faith **(7:27-28)**

Jesus' seems to ignore her much to the disciple's disappointment. He knows she is there. He hears her even though He does not respond right away. Nor does He with us.

His silence does not mean He doesn't hear us (15:23-24)

Jesus is working out His plan in her life and in our life. His delay means we need to trust Him when we are desperately waiting for an answer, for direction or for a need. He will meet her need with very little effort but He wants to draw out her faith. If Jesus and God are delaying an answer in prayer not only is He looking for greater faith and trust from us but He believes He will see it. He knows it is there but if He doesn't give us anything to trust Him for how is our faith going to grow? Don't be discouraged by His delay, be encouraged that He believes we will trust Him for the answer in His time.

Since Matthew's focus is on a Jewish audience, He records something Mark leaves out. Jesus said (seemingly to the disciples more than her) *"I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."*

The disciples' plea for Jesus to send her away may have meant 'Heal her and send her away! She's annoying us!' Jesus responds that He, the Jewish messiah was on mission to save Israel. But that doesn't stop her. As a mother, she is desperate to see her daughter healed. She knows Jesus is her only answer. She also knows she does not deserve this healing but she cries out for mercy.

Jesus' apparent "insult" to her was more of a cultural parable. Jews sadly used the term 'dog' derogatively for Gentiles. We see this in different places in the Bible. His reference to His mission to Israel is not lost on her in the parable of the dog not getting the food that belongs to the children. There were two words for dog in Greek, one being wild, street dogs, the more meaning a tamer dog, a pet. Also, while Jews did not keep dogs as pets Gentiles did. So she understands. Yes, she says I understand you do not treat the dogs the same way as the children, but the dogs still get table scraps. I'm willing to accept a scrap, the stuff the children don't want.

Why was she not insulted? This is the gospel really. None of us deserve grace because we are all sinners. The gospel only offends those who won't admit they are sinners. She understands she's not worthy for Jesus to grant her request, and its for her daughter not for herself. But Jesus is teaching the disciples that His mission – and theirs – will extend beyond Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria but to the ends of the world. At the end of Matthew Jesus will commission His disciples to take the gospel to the ends of the world. And He gives them glimpses in ministry of healing and answering the prayers of Gentiles. She accepts grace because she knows she is unworthy. And

His grace is available to all who request it (15:25-27)

She humbled herself before the Lord, accepting she is unworthy of His grace but requests it and it was granted. It would be wonderful to know how she came to this understanding. She obviously heard of Jesus through others from her community who visited Israel and saw and heard Jesus themselves. She heard other stories about Jesus from other travelers no doubt. She was witnessed to and she responded by faith in Jesus before she met Him. She already believed in Him before this encounter. In faith she asked Him to do what only God can do, remove the power of Satan from their life. And Jesus did because

Jesus Blesses us When We Wait in Faith **(7:29-30)**

If you walk away from this episode in Jesus' life thinking 'If I pray for healing Jesus will bless me with healing' then you've missed the point of the unnamed believing, desperate mother. She was a mom who had a daughter whose life was run by Satan's power. It must have been a horrible household to live in. A believing mom and a demon-possessed child. What spiritual battles must have waged in that home. If her child's demonic possession was a result of godless, pagan worship that the mother may have been involved in the past, what a heart-breaking situation. Whatever the case, the desperate mom wanted her child free from Satan's clutches. She heard Jesus was around and she went to Him and begged Him without shame knowing He was her only hope. Jesus answered her prayer and healed her daughter before she got home. In Matthew's account, Jesus said the woman had 'great faith'. There are only two people Jesus said had 'great faith' during His ministry. This Phoenician woman and a Roman centurion who believed Jesus could heal his servant from a distance.

We all experience desperate situations in our lives. Right now the world is in a desperate situation. All sickness is a reminder that sin is everywhere. All sickness is a result of Adam and Eve's sin because we live in broken and hurting world. A world that is greatly under the power of Satan. Is there any desperation in our prayers for the lost in this world? Is there any willingness on our part to go to uncomfortable places and to outcasts in our community with the hope of the gospel? Jesus walked away deliberately from self-righteous, performance based spiritual people who had little desire to change – not that He didn't try. But He went where people were hurting and desperate to come out from Satan's power and influence to show them mercy and grace.

Jesus has gone back to God. He gave us His Spirit who now lives in us. Are we reflecting His Spirit? Is there compassion and empathy for the spiritually lost as well as the hurting brothers and sisters? How will we show Jesus to them? The Word of God never returns to God without accomplishing the purpose for which He sends it. That same Spirit probably brought people to your mind and my mind who need to hear and/or see Jesus. Perhaps we need to make a call to friend or family member that is a little uncomfortable. Perhaps an outcast in our community or family needs to be shown grace. Let's obey the Spirit as He leads us to make these contacts and be open to where He leads us in this week, to be ready to be Jesus to someone. To help free them from the power of sin and the enemy. And don't be surprised that the blessing of obedience is a lot more reward than you imagined.

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If you have any comments or questions about this message please contact us at oliviet@rideau.net