

## **“We Want Some Crumbs Please!”**

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Text: Mark 7: 24 - 30

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This is an unsettling and eye-opening story. Jesus' attitude towards this Gentile woman and his curt rebuff can seem to us to be so very out of character given our typical understanding of Jesus. But the key to understanding Jesus' response is the simple line, "he did not want anyone to know he was there." Jesus was taking time away from his demanding ministry. Apparently the desire to get away for a while was great enough that he and his followers went to Tyre. Tyre was a Phoenician city, a town of Gentiles, north of Judea, found in present-day Lebanon. So he really wanted to get away, probably assuming that being among Gentiles (who would not know his reputation) would ensure his privacy. That was not to be. As the story says, "but he could not escape notice." This nameless Gentile woman knew he was a miracle worker. But more than that. In Matthew's gospel she even knew his identity, calling out to him "Lord, son of David." So this Gentile woman knew (somehow) that some Jews believed Jesus was a long-anticipated descendant of King David, brought forth by God to forge a new kingdom of God. The Messiah. And she knew he had miraculous powers that could only come from God. So she badgered Jesus for help. "Cure my daughter" she cried. Jesus, in his response, basically said to her, "I am here for the Jews, not the Gentiles." He was trying to shut her down. But still she badgered him, begging him, "please, cure my daughter!"

We can surely sympathize with the mother. We don't know what's wrong with her daughter—many things in Jesus' day were ascribed to possession by demons. But, clearly, her daughter's condition was beyond her capacity to help...and like any parent she was anxious for the problem to be gone. So she went to Jesus, hoping he would do something. Most of us have probably done the same when we have felt helpless. Prayer seems to come most quickly to us when our back is against the wall and circumstances are beyond our control. It is then that we too can find ourselves begging God, "please help!" When we do this, I don't think it is a moment of selfishness or even a moment when we want to dominate God and bend God to our will—"DO THIS FOR ME!" No. I think those moments are ones that show forth our real, limited humanity. That life for us all has its anxious moments. That life—for all of us—has for moments when we feel helpless. But we know, like this nameless woman, God may not come through for us in how we want our prayers to be answered.

CS Lewis in the mid-20th century was the most popular teacher of the Christian faith in the English language through his books, public lectures and radio program on BBC. His favourite topic to talk about was prayer, and he was a man of prayer. When his wife, Joy, got ill with cancer, Lewis did what he always did. He prayed. In his anxious, helpless moment he begged God to heal his wife...but it was not to be. She succumbed to her illness and died. Later, Lewis wrote his book "A Grief Observed" in which he

confessed how his wife's death and his unanswered prayers brought struggles to his faith. This book got a mixed reception. Some of Lewis' admirers found it troubling that such a celebrated Christian as CS Lewis could experience such despair and doubt. God did not respond to his badgering. But rather than turning from God Lewis came out of the darkness with renewed understandings of God. He came to acknowledge that every one of us, yes, dies, taken in so many different ways. So he shifted from disappointment with God to feelings of gratitude, for having received and experienced the gift of true love in his life—for he was about 60 years old when he married for the first time. And, for a man who had taught countless people about the meaning and practice of prayer, he came to a new understanding about prayer. That in those moments when we badger God and God does not respond as we would like, Lewis came to see that God can be responding nonetheless. And so he wrote, "Prayer is not to change God, but it is to change us." He experienced that change, his faith became sure once more, and he could feel blessed by God even when it seemed that God was heedless of his concerns.

Which brings us back to the nameless woman in our story today. There she was, badgering this miracle worker she knew could help her...who she knew by reputation had helped so many....and here he was turning a cold shoulder. Why? In fact his response was harsh! In Matthew's account of this incident Jesus started by ignoring her pleading. Then the disciples said to Jesus, "Send her away because she won't stop shouting!" Jesus eventually responded to her. "Let the children be fed first, for it's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." The children are the children of Israel. The dogs are the Gentiles. In other words, Jesus was saying that the spiritual food he had to give was for the people of Israel. Wow! That sounds so shocking, doesn't it? But I think in that moment Jesus' answer went back to his primary mission. His mission was to bring about the renewal of God's chosen people so that the people of God could in turn witness to the world how God would have all people live. This makes sense because Jesus told the woman, "Let the children (of Israel) be fed first." Later, we hear this sense of mission in Jesus' commission of the apostles after his resurrection: "you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). We hear this strategy of building out the kingdom of God in these logical stages: starting with Jesus' three years of mentoring his first followers, to the apostles influencing Jerusalem, then Jerusalem influencing Judea, and then: the world!

So Jesus gave her his answer that he wasn't here to help them at this moment in his ministry. And he did that in a pretty derogatory way, calling Gentiles (including her) "dogs." But she would not be put off. "Sir" she said, "even dogs sitting under the table get to eat the crumbs of the food provided to children when those crumbs fall to the floor." It sounds like she is shaming Jesus, asking Jesus (essentially), "OK, even if we aren't first, can't we at least have some crumbs now?" She seems to respect what Jesus was telling her, believe what Jesus was telling her, and yet still pressed Jesus to think beyond his strategy for influencing the world. "Can't you help Gentiles even a bit, now?" It seems that her comeback line took Jesus aback, to think about what she just said, and reconsider his priorities. And so he responded, "For saying that, go home: your daughter has been healed." And she was.

The gospels are not comprehensive accounts of Jesus' life, prepared with the rigour of 20th century historians. But this story reads like a turning point in Jesus' ministry: that plan A could be modified. Certainly his focus continued on the Jews, but an opening was given the Gentiles. The very next story in Mark's gospel is another healing story, taking place in the region of the Decapolis (which is Greek for "the 10 cities"). This was a district settled by Greek colonists 300 years earlier. So the very next healing story took place among the Gentiles. After that we find a few other encounters with Gentiles. So in the end, Jesus was Jesus. He healed the nameless woman's daughter in Tyre, even though he was on his planned time off. And he healed Gentiles, even though it was not his primary mission. He chose to extend his circle of care, because he cared.

The challenge Jesus experienced here is one we can feel so easily as well. We are surrounded by the call to care and we too can put limits on that care. We can say "I'm off duty. I can't care right now." A colleague of mine was heading out his front door on his way to church on a Sunday morning. He noticed his neighbor standing on her porch, staring down the street, anxiously fidgeting. So he went over and asked, "What's wrong?" She said she thought her husband had had a heart attack, and she was waiting for the ambulance. So this church minister jumped into action: checking the husband and helping the wife. When the ambulance arrived he phoned his church. "I have a serious situation here. My neighbor had a heart attack, and his wife is beside herself with worry. I'm going to go with her to the hospital. She really needs support right now. Could you let the elders know I won't be there for the worship service. The sermon is on my desk. I know one of the elders can deliver it just fine." Then he hung up, and left the stunned congregant holding the phone. Well, one of the elders nervously agreed to lead the worship service. The elder explained why the minister wasn't there. "He is caring for neighbor which is—I guess—what Jesus calls all of us to do." My friend says that this was the turnaround moment in the congregation's history, when they all "got it", recognizing that our call to care extends beyond just caring for themselves in church. My colleague told me, "It was, no doubt, the most powerful sermon I ever preached...and I wasn't even there." Even if it's inconvenient, even if we may not want to at first, the call to care calls us to care.

This story calls us to reconsider caring: not just "when" but also "who." This incident stretched Jesus sense of who was in his circle of care, and the story asks us to be ready to expand our circle of care in Jesus name. Here's a story about another Presbyterian minister. In the 1870's a man named George Leslie MacKay became our denomination's first overseas missionary. He went to the island of Formosa (Taiwan). He was sent to preach the gospel and to help people become Christians. But he approached his evangelistic goal by providing tangible aid to people in need. That began with dental care, and so he became a very popular amateur dentist. Most

of the people of Formosa were Chinese settlers. So he chose to help the ignored people: the indigenous people. He cared by establishing schools, including a school for young girls (unheard of on that island). In his ministry he immersed himself in their culture: learning their language, dressing like them, marrying a local woman and having biracial children. The members of our Board of World Mission were horrified! For years people at General Assembly stood up and demanded that MacKay be fired, or at least brought home. They said he had “gone native” (quote/unquote). He was not to care for these people or care in these ways. In time Presbyterians grew to appreciate his motives and methods, and in 1894 he was elected Moderator of The Presbyterian Church of Canada. And as for the people of Formosa? If you visit Taiwan today, you can go to the first schoolhouse he built. You can visit a university he started. You can walk into a hospital named in his honour, built 11 years after his death. And you can see a vibrant Christian community, the seed of which was one man’s Christian care.

One nameless Gentile woman prompted Jesus to reflect on when to care and who to care for. What are the needs for care that are shouting at us, that may prompt our reflections?