

Pastor Jonna Bohigian
No Longer an Outsider
Mark 7:24 – 30

Dear friends in Christ, grace and peace to you, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

A seminary professor once said, “Scripture is a lion; let it roar! Don’t apologize for Scripture, but boldly share it. As you prepare your sermons in the parish, allow yourself time to *live under* the text. Allow it to shape and guide you, even as you seek to guide the congregation you are serving.”

As I prepared for this sermon and sat under today’s Gospel text, I experienced a sincere conviction that I feel compelled to share with you.

When I graduated from college, I had no idea *what* I was supposed to do, but I reasoned that as a young single person, it was time for an adventure. I found a mission’s organization which sent American Christians around the world to teach English. Our respectability in the classroom would be the portal into relationships, which could lead to avenues for spiritual conversations. I was trained to teach English as a foreign language, and sent to the Czech Republic.

Those two years were quite an adventure, but they were no vacation. Many of my adult students took it upon themselves to teach me about Czech culture – the food, the beer, the personality, the history, and the people. Some even took it upon themselves to warn me about one of the people groups, the Roma people (commonly called “gypsies”). They were described as menacing, ungrateful, pickpockets, nonconformists, unceasingly procreating to take advantage of the system.

One of my students shared that she had worked for social services. She soon after got out of that field, because she had been so discouraged by her Roma clients. She told me that nothing ever seemed to help. One of her families even burned down the government-owned building they lived in.

I wish I could say that I was generous and suspended judgment, that I *didn’t* discount a whole group of people because of secondhand stories and warnings, that I didn’t fear and close myself off to them. But the honest answer is, I *did*. I accepted the narrative of my students and

felt *thankful* that I could not have been mistaken for a Roma person. (I much more resembled my light-skinned students.) It's also true to say that I didn't often think about it. My exposure to the Roma people was so little, that I rarely confronted the negative narrative I had been given.

Years later, as I think back on my experience, I feel *pretty uncomfortable*. I didn't care to challenge the narrative I had been given; I simply lived within that schema. It is also amazing to me that I never wondered if a part of my calling to the Czech Republic was to be challenged, and to build relationships with the Roma people. I had a very narrow view of what God desired of me those two years.

I recognize that in sharing what I just shared, I've outed myself. And I will admit that I yet have quite a distance to grow. And this kind of growth is *precisely* what Jesus is calling for in today's Gospel reading.

In Mark 7, Jesus has an encounter with the religious leaders, and it turns out to be a turning point in his ministry. The religious leaders are upset with Jesus' disciples, that they don't do a ceremonial washing of their hands before eating. (It's important to note that their concern has *nothing* to do with sanitation; their concern is being "clean," and therefore right with God.) Jesus' disciples don't perform this ceremonial cleansing, and the religious leaders want to ensure that this negligence, or *whatever* excuse Jesus may offer, is rectified. As Jesus often does, he points to the *heart* of the matter. The religious leaders are concerned with ensuring that everyone is *ceremonially* clean before God, but their hearts are selfish and *unclean*.

Up until *this point* in Jesus' ministry, he has focused on bringing the good news to the Jews. But in the Gospel of Mark, *this* experience with the religious leaders marks a shift in Jesus' ministry.

He leaves Gennesaret and enters the Gentile (non-Jewish) area of Tyre. **(picture)** Mark seems to indicate that Jesus is in Tyre to get a break. Or at the very least, that he does not intend to do any public ministry, as we see in verse 24: **(verse)** "He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret." A Greek, Syrophenician woman barges into the house and falls at Jesus' feet.

Let's make sure that nothing is overlooked here. *First*, this person is a woman. "Social mores discouraged...contact between men and women." Men and women were *not* to fraternize in public; it would put into question their integrity. *Second*, she is a Greek, meaning she is *not* a Jew. She is "unclean." *Third*, she is Syrophenician, meaning, she is a different ethnicity. And her ethnicity is one linked to the evil Queen Jezebel from the Old Testament. According to theologian R. Martin, "She is a born loser on 3 counts."¹ She is the wrong gender, the wrong religion, and the wrong ethnicity. On top of *all of that*, her daughter is possessed by an evil spirit! *Surely* Jesus will condemn her and send her away!

But this woman is *audacious!* For some reason, she believes that Jesus *will heal* her daughter. And she's got nothing to lose, so she *begs* Jesus to heal her daughter.

Jesus' reply is what one might expect from a rabbi of his time. He refuses her. It only makes sense. His purpose is not to this woman or other people like her, but to his own people. Eventually, the good news will be for people like this woman, but Mark seems to indicate that Jesus does not yet intend for that shift to take place. See verse 27: **(verse)** "First let the children eat all they want...for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs." In this one verse, Jesus indicates a number of things. Jesus' purpose is to prioritize the *children*, the Jews. This woman is therefore *not* the priority; in this analogy, she is more like a dog, which was the derogatory slight for Greeks. Jesus calls her a "little dog," but this doesn't lessen the sting.

As readers of this ancient text, we are not privy to Jesus' body language or tone. We don't know if he had a twinkle in his eye or kindness in his voice. All we see are the words he spoke. And they are *really uncomfortable*. They are the kind of words that most would be embarrassed to hear our say aloud. And perhaps that's the point. What Jesus is doing here is shining a light on the deep, dark thoughts. And when they are spoken out loud, it feels *really uncomfortable*. When this same story is told in Matthew 15, Matthew writes that Jesus' disciples are with him. In Mark, all we recognize are Jesus and this woman.

With *whatever* tone or *whatever* eye Jesus has, the woman is *not deterred*. She persists, and presses Jesus' metaphor to make her case. She does not deny being desperate and lowly.

¹ Tim Geddert, *Mark*, 169.

With the greatest respect, she calls him, “Lord,” and reminds him that “even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs” (Mk 7:28). The food may be meant for the children, but there are still crumbs left over, and that is *more than enough* for her. *Please!*

This story is *incredible!* This woman, this *outsider*, knows that Jesus is the *only one* who can give her daughter the healing that she needs. And she will do *whatever it takes!* She is willing to be on display and shame herself in order to get a “yes.” She won’t take “no” for an answer, because she knows, *deep within her bones*, that if Jesus can only give her *scraps*, it will be enough!

There is something remarkable about being desperate. You’re willing to try anything, do anything, to alleviate the desperation. Your vision becomes narrowed, and you push and push and *push*.

There is an interesting notion among many Christians, that you and I must passively accept whatever happens, and never challenge God. This story in Mark 7 and stories like Abraham negotiating on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah, fly in the face of that notion. In these stories, God *honors* the negotiation, and seems to in fact be *moved* by the encounter.

In Mark 7, Jesus *honors* the woman and says, “For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter” (Mk 7:29). Jesus tested the woman, and the woman passes with *flying colors!* She becomes an example for all others to imitate. And after his encounter with her, Jesus shifts his ministry to intentionally include non-Jews, *outsiders*, like this woman.

It’s pretty amazing, that a desperate outsider can be the catalyst for change in Jesus’ ministry. She knows that she is not outside the grace of God, and she fights for whatever scraps she can get!

It is all too easy to think that because you and I have been Christians for a long time, or have studied, been disciplined, and have miraculous stories to tell, that we have the corner on God. Maybe also if we are in positions of authority or are doing well financially, we conclude that God must really be pleased with us, and you and I are therefore better than *them*. (I hope that in saying this, you recognize that I am holding the mirror to myself; I am *not exempting* myself.)

Mark's contrast of the religious leaders with the desperate outsider is *stark*. With it, comes a caution that those who are on the inside may *not* be, and those who are on the outside may not be *either*. *No one* is on the *inside* because of their breeding, success, and good behavior, nor is anyone on the *outside* because of their gender, ill-breeding, and lack of success. Though this is the way of the world, this is *not* how God works. As 1 Corinthians says, **(verse)** "God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God – that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: 'Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord'" (1 Cor 1:27 – 30).

There is *nothing* you and I can do to earn God's favor. And fortunately, it doesn't work like that. You and I and all people have been created and are loved *independently* of what we've done. And God showed His love for us in this: "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8).

With Jesus, there is *no one* outside his love, *no one* outside his goodness. There are no longer any outsiders.

And as the church, we seek to resemble Jesus' love for all of our neighbors. Imagine what it would look like for everyone to feel welcome here and a part of the family! What an exciting, diverse place we would be! And one day, this is *precisely* what it will look like (from Revelation 7): "I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: 'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.' All the angels...fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying: 'Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!'" (Rev 7:9 – 12).