

Mark 7:24-30

²⁴ From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, ²⁵but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. ²⁶Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷He said to her, ‘Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.’ ²⁸But she answered him, ‘Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.’ ²⁹Then he said to her, ‘For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.’ ³⁰So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Psalm 145:10-18

¹⁰ All your works shall give thanks to you, O Lord, and all your faithful shall bless you.
¹¹ They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom, and tell of your power,
¹² to make known to all people your mighty deeds, and the glorious splendor of your kingdom.
¹³ Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures throughout all generations.
¹⁴ You lift up those who are falling and raise up those who are oppressed.
¹⁵ The eyes of all look to you in hope, and you give them their food in due season.
¹⁶ God, you open your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing.
¹⁷ Lord, you are just in all your ways and loving toward all that you have created.
¹⁸ You are near to all who call upon you, all who call upon you in truth.

Walter Wink, one of the uniquely brilliant Biblical scholars of our time, talks about his approach to scripture this way, he says:

“When I study the Bible, alone or with others, my ultimate aim is not information, but transformation. I see no reason,” he continues, “to trouble myself or others with Scripture unless in doing so we intend to approach as closely as we dare to the mystical majesty of the living God. Why open this explosive and shattering book unless we are willing, not just to be added to, but subtracted from? Shall I read Scripture merely to be confirmed in my own good opinions of myself and my world?”¹

Not information, but Transformation. Though this is not how most of us search scripture, whether together or on our own. Whether in the high towers of seminary academia or in Sunday schools happening in church basements; whether we are using literary and historical criticism to explore a deeper or original meaning, or whether we are trying to be fundamental Biblical literalists, the most common approach of engaging with scripture is to accumulate knowledge and be reinforced in the presuppositions we have brought with us to the text. We generally come seeking to place information somewhere in our pre-formed categories and ideas, rather than to consider that these stories – this book – might be an element of our continual transformation.

¹ From Wink’s article: *The Education of the Apostles* in Religious Education, Vol 83 No 2 Spring 1988

We usually call theology done by non-white or women, ‘contextual theology’, referring to the context out of which their theology comes from. Some of the types of ‘contextual theology’ include Black, Feminist, Liberation, Womanist, African, and Asian theologies. Theology done by white men, we just call ‘theology’, ignoring the contexts and privilege that greatly shape this theology. And in our scripture this morning, Jesus meets a contextual theologian – Jesus’ theology comes up against that of a Canaanite woman. This contextual theologian seems to force Jesus to reexamine the preestablished categories which his own cultural context has helped him created – she seems to push him to a moment of transformation.

This story has had me thinking of some times when I have met contextual theologians but was unable to see what vision of God they were offering to me – times when my own context blocked a movement toward transformation. Someone who was trying to tell me a word of truth, but it did not land because of my own enculturated eyes – because of the view from where I sit as a white, middle-class, educated male.

I lived in New Mexico for one year, and for the first and only time in my life, had a roommate who was not white. Doug. Doug was a large Black male my age. And there were a few times when he was telling me about his experience with the police in Jackson, Michigan where he grew up. About being pulled over for no reason. About being followed. About being man-handled. And I remember thinking as Doug was talking, “that must have just been one bad cop” or “there must have been some misunderstanding,” or “it just doesn’t make any sense.”

Doug was trying to tell me of the reality of his experience. I was not listening to be transformed. I was not listening for transformation, only to fit his words into the established

categories of my mind – categories which fit into my experience and my view of how the world worked. It was not until the *Black Lives Matter Movement* that I remembered Doug’s words, until I truly heard Doug’s words.

Or, more recently, when the City of Boise cleared out Cooper Court a few years ago (a homeless encampment that had grown near some of the shelters). Many homeless advocates and other concerned citizens from Boise poured down to the area to protest, to see if they could help – many were people that did not typically frequent that part of Boise. People were there to try to help, try to speak a word of truth to the city, to try to show some support for those being moved from their tent homes. And in the middle of this scene, one of the homeless men said, “hey, unless you here with empty rooms in your house are here to offer us that spot, we don’t much need or want your help, so just go on home.” That was a word of truth to me. Not that he spoke for everyone, but this was a word of truth to me from a contextual theologian – a word forcing me to consider where the limits of my compassion and justice were – a word of what I was willing to do and not do. Did any of those rushing down to ‘help’ or protest stop to first ask those who were homeless what they wanted or desired?

And so Jesus meets a contextual theologian. It happens in the coastal city of Tyre well outside of Palestinian Jewish society – historic centers of Phoenician military. Again, Jesus seems to want to be away from the crowd – to be looking to rest or simply in need of a break – *Mark* tells us that he enters a house and doesn’t want anyone to know he is there. But of course, word begins to get

around that this great Jewish healer and teacher has arrived in town. And so a woman with a sick daughter enters the house and bows at Jesus' feet.

In *Mark's* explanation of her, we learn that she has three strikes against her. 1) a woman in a completely male dominated culture, 2) a Gentile, a Greek. A non-Jew. Thus her "creed", her religious status means she is pagan – likely worshipping many gods of her culture and place, and 3) she is Syrophenician, this links her with the Canaanites of the Old Testament – the chief enemy of the Jews once they left Egypt – those who occupied the 'Promised Land' before the people of Israel got there.² Essentially, she is the archetypal "other" from a Judean perspective – set apart from Jesus and his disciples by her gender, her religion, and her country of origin. So Jesus gets out of a boat – and he is approached by a woman whose daughter is in need of healing.

We know how this scene goes – this same thing has just happened a few chapters earlier – Jesus gets out of a boat, traveling on the Sea of Galilee and he is approached by Jairus, a leader of a local synagogue. His daughter is dying and he comes to beg Jesus to heal her. Jesus goes with him to his home where his daughter is thought to be dead – Jesus says, "little girl, get up." And she is healed.

So we would expect a similar outcome, perhaps a small exchange of words, and then Jesus performing the healing that is sought. But this is not what happens. Jesus resists. I might be wrong, but I can't think of another time when someone comes to Jesus in search of healing and Jesus refuses. And a child. Even usually those who are most hardened, are moved by children. In Boise if you are a homeless single adult, you will be waiting many years until any program might

² Tim Geddert's Believers Church Commentary, Mark.

help get you housing. But, if you are a family with children, you are likely to wait only about 6 months. We blame adults for whatever their situation is, but we don't blame children. We are moved to compassion by children. This, to me, makes Jesus' resistance even more poignant.

And so Jesus refuses her. But not only refuses – not only for a child – but in doing so, uses what would have been a racial slur, referring to this woman and her child as “doggies” – a common way that Jewish men of this time would have referred to those who were not Jewish. “It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the doggies.”

But this mother persists. She will not go away easily. “Sir, even the dogs under the table under the table eat the children's crumbs.”

This is a hard passage to read. To hear. For it seems like Jesus, our most atypical Jewish man, has just reacted like the most typical of Jewish men – refusing this foreign woman's plea, speaking to her as if she is beneath him – using a tired and painful insult/racial slur.

Like last week's story of the 'Feed of the 5,000', there are a few different explanations that have been offered for Jesus' behavior here.

1. **Some have argued that Jesus is actually making progress** by putting the Gentiles and Jews in the same house – the dog is under the table, not outside. This is supposed to represent progress, sure Jesus is still referring to Gentiles as dogs, but at least they are inside dogs. This might be progress for some, but this doesn't quite seem to cut it for the 'Son of God.'
2. **Some believe Jesus is not actually refusing her**, but he is trying to show his disciples, and us, how most religious people have treated this woman and her people in the past. That he wants his

disciples to hear what a terrible refusal this is – for them to hear how terrible it sounds, to refuse a sick child. That perhaps, if they see the logical conclusion of their insults and views of superiority, they will be changed.

3. Some have argued that **Jesus is setting the stage for this Syrophenician woman to be the teacher** – that Jesus knows the persistence of a mother with a sick child will not be stopped, and so he is setting the stage for her to here be the voice of authority. In our time, we might say he knows of his power and privilege and is stepping aside so another may lead – so that the one who has historically been oppressed can lead. Thus, his refusal is just a device of teaching and empowerment.

4. That Jesus too has a cultural context that has shaped him. That in his humanness, perhaps in his fatigue at all those who have sought him out, he falls back to the old tapes of prejudice that exists in all our minds. That Jesus has not yet fully embraced the full scope of his mission – that he has not quite yet believed that the table has been set for: Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free, gay and straight, oppressor and oppressed.

And like we heard last week, the answers are not written in the back of the book.³

Perhaps, just perhaps, Jesus had not yet realized the full extent of God's mission or the radical nature of the kingdom he proclaimed. I know that's a somewhat uncomfortable conclusion to reach. Despite how many of us here do appreciate looking at the human side of Jesus, this is a bit *too human*, even for me.

³ Barbara Brown Taylor.

But it is at least possible that this is what happened – that the meeting of this Canaanite theologian transformed Jesus, and the rest of history. IF we believe that Jesus is fully human as well as fully divine, then perhaps we should not be surprised to see that even Jesus developed in his own recognition of God’s vision for the world. It could be that Jesus himself needed a prophet, to help him more fully get God’s view of the kingdom.

If this woman did help transform Jesus’ view of her and his mission, then perhaps the miracle of the story is not so much that a young girl was healed, but that a religious leader was willing to truly listen and be changed; perhaps the miracle is that he was willing to hear the view of the oppressed in his own time, and believe. One of the things I have learned from reading Black theologians is that we usually don’t believe what the oppressed are telling us during their lifetime – during our lifetime. Now, on our side of history, we say, “yes, the slaves were clearly telling us the truth; those living under segregation were clearly telling us the truth about their situation and how they were being treated about lynching.” But in our own time, as the oppressed try to tell us about their experiences of police, of the criminal justice system, of the education system, of sexual harassment – we say what I said to Doug, “that can’t be quite right” or “that must have just been one bad person/teacher/officer/judge/lawyer/store clerk/pastor.”

We listen for information, not transformation. We fail to hear the contextual theologians of our own time trying to help us see where our own context is blinding us – stunting our transformational possibilities.

And so we must listen to the contextual theologians all around us, coming to us everyday, trying to be part of God's transforming presence to us – we must listen and hear – not judge or explain away or try to fit into our preexisting categories. But to listen. To hear.

When a migrant tells us of their treatment at the border or in holding or by ICE;

When someone without health insurance tells us what it is like to navigate the system – we must listen and hear.

Amen, when a woman tells us that our hugs linger a bit long – or that our touch or comments are unwanted, we must listen and hear.

When our roommate tells us their experience of policing;

When the scriptures tells us a story of Jesus that does not mesh with our picture of Jesus, or when Jesus shows us something of God that does not match our doctrine – our role is to listen, not to do theological gymnastics to allow our doctrine to remain unscathed, but to consider that we might be in need of God's transforming power.

Our job is to be open to transformation. To the possibility that the Holy Spirit is still on the move – that revelation is still coming to us if we have ears to hear – that even in our 30s and 50s and 70s and 90s, the God of transformation is still working on us, still pursuing us. Perhaps if Jesus' vision of God could still be expanded by listening to this contextual theologian, perhaps we too might still be in need of corrective lens.

Amen and amen.

