



“Ears to Hear and a Voice to Speak”

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Mark 7:24-37***

When I was a little girl growing up in rainy Oregon, I would often wake before sunrise to the smell of coffee and cigarettes and the soft laughter of my father and his brothers and sisters. He had nine siblings and, when any of them came to town, they would arrive early, bring donuts, and gather around the kitchen table to tell stories. They called my Dad “Jute,” and when they came he made the coffee and let my mother sleep in.

By the time I stumbled into the kitchen in my nightgown, they’d be done with a round of jokes and stories and warming up for the first argument of the day. I would hop onto my dad’s lap and listen as they told, with a good deal of interruption and bull-calling, their personal versions of what had happened after their family had been forced to leave their farm in Oklahoma in 1934. “Blown out,” they called it, meaning that their farm and the local economy had been destroyed when the top soil had blown away in the wind.

As children, they traveled in a rattletrap pick-up and picked fruit all over the West until, one by one, they had taken off to raise their own children, meaning me and my 25 or so first cousins. As much as they embarrassed me with way they dressed and talked, I was always a little bit proud of my aunts and uncles. They always had a joke or a story to tell. They could fix almost anything with a hammer and black tape. They listened to so much Woody Guthrie, I thought he was an uncle I hadn’t met. They were happy with fried potatoes and white gravy at every meal. They loved to travel around with no plans and no expectations. They weren’t the slightest bit aware that they gave off an aura of being down on their luck and they were most happy when they could strike up a conversation with an unwitting stranger and get him or her to laugh out loud.

I always thought of them as “Okies,” a word I learned from John Steinbeck, and I believed that they gave me, a white girl growing up in the 1970s, a little bit of culture, a little bit of heritage to take with me as I went forth into the great homogenizing world. It wasn’t until I went to graduate school on the East Coast in my late twenties that I ran into someone outside my family who said she knew what an Okie was. Her name was Irma Rodriguez and she had grown up in Monterey. She was selecting student members for a task force on multiculturalism that I, in my search for community and belonging so far from home, wanted to be on. Okie, she explained to me, was what her father, a Mexican immigrant, called white people. Okie, she said, wasn’t a socio-economic group; it was just an ethnic slur for white people, like honky or cracker. Further, she said, while it was my choice whether or not to label my experience with that word, growing up poor and white in Oregon wasn’t the same as being Latina or African-

American and she couldn't see me making a valuable contribution to a task force on multiculturalism.

"Oh," I thought, and wandered away in silence, wondering "am I an Okie or am I an *Okie*?"

The Syro-Phoenician woman in today's text is having a similar mind-bending moment. The story begins in Tyre, an urban area in the south of Phoenicia, just north of Galilee. The woman is described as being Syro-Phoenician, meaning her people are from the north of Phoenicia, near Syria, and she is racially and religiously distinct from Jesus and his followers.

Unfortunately for Jesus, who has traveled into Phoenicia to get a break from the crowds in Galilee clamoring for healing, the woman has heard of him and his great healing powers. Although it is unseemly, immoral almost, for a woman to approach a strange man alone, she comes to the house where he is staying. She falls to her feet and begs him to save her child. And he rebukes her with the words: "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." And she responds, "Sir, even the dog under the table eats the children's crumbs."

We moderns can't help but inhale at his slur. We can't help but ponder her response and wonder if, in the minute pause between hearing what he said and how she responds, did she think, "Am I a dog or am I a *dog*?"

When I first heard today's story about Jesus and the Syro-Phoenician woman, I was a little bit shocked. It was early last fall and I was at one of my first worship planning meetings here at Eden, and I thought: "Well, that's one of the meanest things I've ever heard Jesus say!"

Since then, I've learned that this is a very complex piece of scripture. Like a diamond, it has many facets. Each time you look at you see something different. The first time I picked it up I was very struck by Jesus, by how he addresses the Syro-Phoenician woman, calling her, in essence, a common Jewish slur, by how he denies her his healing power and by how he is immediately transformed by her grace-filled words.

The next time I picked it up I was very focused on the Syro-Phoenician woman herself and how, in her desperation to save her little girl, and despite her lowly position on the social totem pole, she had the courage, the wit, and the Spirit to respond to Jesus with words that would sway his opinion.

More recently, I have been very struck by the historical and metaphorical nature of this story, by how there is a good probability that this story is included here as reassurance to the Roman Gentiles of the first century that Jesus, though a Jew, had consciously considered and graciously accepted that his infant religion would be expanded to include the non-Jews who were flocking to house churches all over Rome.

So complex is this text that when it came to writing this sermon I struggled to decide which of the many theological messages might be the right one for today. With a little prayer and thought, I realized that part of my struggle was due to the fact that I was

trying to reduce tremendous complexity to one pithy but meaning-filled point. When I finally put my fingers to keyboard, I found that there was not one, but five important points—five points I believe we can all rely upon as helpful and as true for us as they have been for centuries of Christians.

First, you are not a dog. No matter what anyone calls you or what you call yourself. I think most of us take this one for granted—when we are in public. In private, however, when we are alone or feeling down, it's pretty easy—for many personal and cultural reasons—to fall with sadness into thinking that because we aren't loved, valued, or treated as we should be or because we are called names, that we are somehow less. And that isn't true. You are not less. Regardless of how you are treated or labeled, regardless of what your needs are, you are God's perfect creation, wholly worthy of all the healing and grace and community you desire.

Second, you are included in God's plan. I might not say that if today's story had ended differently, that is, if Jesus had not changed his mind about healing the Syro-Phoenician woman's demon-possessed daughter. But here, in the earliest Book of the New Testament, in one of the first recorded versions of the Good News, circa 70 CE, Jesus paused and considered and assented to the inclusion of all people. No matter who you are, if there's a reign of heaven, you're in. If there's a global plan of salvation, you're covered. You, no matter who you are or what you do, belong to God.

Point three, authority figures can and do make mistakes. To fully understand this point, you need to back up to the beginning of Chapter 7 of Mark. When the apostles are accused by the Pharisees and scribes of violating Jewish purity laws by failing to wash their hands before eating, Jesus defends them, saying in essence, not once but three times, first to the Pharisees, then to the crowd, and finally to his disciples, "Look, it's not what you put into your body that defiles you, it's what comes out of your heart. You are defiled not by what you eat but by what you say and do to others." Yes, by what you say and do to others.

His placement of good intentions toward others over strict adherence to religious rules must have been ringing in his ears as he told the Syro-Phoenician woman that healing her child would be the same as throwing the children's food to the dogs. Jesus, the man, the Minister in Training, following a call that appeared to be spiraling out of his control, is about to discover that from time to time what came out of his own heart was sometimes ahead of his understanding of God's plan for humankind. Humans make mistakes and human leaders, even great human leaders, make mistakes too. We would be wise to remember this whenever and however we encounter authority.

Fourth point: We need each other. To learn and grow, we need to hear other people's perspective on our lives, our needs, and our world. Megan McKenna in her book, *Not Counting Women and Children*, makes a strong argument that although there appears to be a power imbalance between Jesus and the Syro-Phoenician woman, they are equal in their need. She needs his healing power to restore her child and her life and he needs her intuitive knowledge that she is not a dog, she is included in God's plan, and that authority figures can and do make mistakes. He needs her awareness that everyone is covered by God's global plan of salvation. They were interdependent. We are interdependent, relying on each other for knowledge, healing, and grace.

My fifth and final point: You are called to speak up. Had the story ended with Syro-Phoenician woman walking away in silence, failing to press her point, would we be here today? Her words made a world of difference—in the story, for herself, for her healed daughter, and in reality, for the rapid growth of Christianity from a small Jewish sect to the national religion of the Roman Empire. Your words will make a world of difference. Why? Because there is someone out there—maybe some authority figure, maybe just a friend—who needs to hear your truth, so they too can reach a new level in their understanding of what will bring peace and justice to our planet.

I can't help but look back on my conversation in graduate school with Irma Rodriguez about the task force on multiculturalism that went on without me. Unlike the Syro-Phoenician woman, I let Irma's definition of "Okie" trump my definition of—and pride in—my own life experience and heritage. My failure to speak up and express my truth prevented us from seeing that, as two of the few working class people at the school, we needed each other and that we could learn from one another. If I could do it all over, I would speak up so she would know that regardless of my race, I had something of value to contribute.

My hope for you—for all of you—is that when the opportunity to speak up to authority presents itself—and it will in many guises and many ways—you will remember the Syro-Phoenician woman. That you will know that you are worthy of being heard, that you will see that the hearer needs you as much as you need him or her, and that you too have something of value to contribute. I hope you will remember that what you have to say is unique and beautiful and the reign of heaven will not be complete without your voice.

My friends, in the words of the song we are about to sing, you are called to tell your story. You are called to blend your voice with all the others, trusting that we are all interdependent, that we all make mistakes, and that the words you speak may have the power to change our world forever. Amen.