



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

September 5, 2021

Opening Up

Rev. Louise Rogers

© 2021 by Rev. Louise Rogers and Westminster Presbyterian Church.

All rights reserved.

No part of this sermon may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the author.

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: September 16, 2021

Mark 7:24–35

The Syrophenician Woman's Faith

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, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He 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.' But she answered him, 'Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.' Then he said to her, 'For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.' So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, 'Ephphatha', that is, 'Be opened.' And immediately his ears

were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.

Last week I made an appointment for a checkup with my dentist. When I called the person on the other end of the phone was none too happy. My call came rather late in the day, and she said, “let me turn my computer back on.” After we exchanged the necessary information and the appointment was set, I gently asked, “are you having a bad day”? “Yes, I really am.” came the tired response. “Thanks for asking.” We all have bad days when we are tired, overwhelmed, and impatient with people calling just as we are walking out the door. But today’s scripture calls us to wonder, is Jesus allowed to have a bad day? We hear about the human side of Jesus seemingly not at his best. These remarkable healings give us pause as they teach us about the presence of God in the everyday, begging the question, what is the good news? Who is the good news really for?

When we catch up with Jesus in Mark’s gospel he has been busy teaching both followers and opponents. We might sum up the lessons by saying, “you can’t judge a book by its cover;” you must look beyond external factors like nationality or religion or social position to get the real story on someone’s faith. Jesus then puts theory into practice by traveling a good 50 miles out of his way into the region of Tyre—into the heart of paganland. Our text makes it clear that Jesus wants a vacation, to be left alone. Given that there is no social

media or photos of Jesus he can now move around unnoticed. That is until a woman approaches.

This scene reads like a play. The protagonist is a mother who displays real chutzpah, the disciples are with him as the gaping audience. The mother gets in Jesus's face, begging him to heal her daughter. There is only one problem: she is one of the outsiders. It means she has no business speaking to a man in public, let alone a rabbi, much less the Messiah. The social gap is cavernous. She is desperate as she begs Jesus to heal her daughter. At first Jesus doesn't even respond, then he says, "Let the children [of Israel] be fed first," he says, "for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." This is not what we expect from Jesus! He is the one who loves everyone, who honors women and cares for them deeply. What is really happening?

For centuries scholars have proposed different theories on this text; some believe Jesus is intent on his mission to bring the kingdom first to the House of Israel. The rest of us must get in line behind them. Others believe, given his humanity, Jesus is having a bad day. Still others believe that Jesus is seeing this time as a teachable moment. He knows the desperate needs of the mother and he states the narrow social position accepted by those watching who believe, she is not deserving of God's grace and attention. In that exchange, they see firsthand how her need for healing is the greater priority and Jesus responds with the healing miracle. By faith, the mother succeeds in

crossing the society line drawn in the sand between them. The woman's faith and persistence teaches Jesus that his mission is much bigger than he had imagined, and she opened the eyes to all that God's love and mercy transcends all boundaries.

How easy it is to draw lines between ourselves and those we consider as "other". We sometimes place limits on what we can do and whom we can help. We become fearful of others who are not quite like us – never taking time to learn our neighbor's story. We make unconscious judgments each day about who deserves our help, our kindness, our attention, and even God's favor. The good news is that Jesus worked through his complacency and saw God's presence in this outsider.

Westminster Church hosted an annual Family Life Retreat for many years. One year the featured speaker was Saleem Ghubril, a friend of Westminster Church. Saleem is the former Director of the Pittsburgh Project and current Director of The Pittsburgh Promise. The Pittsburgh Promise has a mission to "envision a future where all our urban youth are equipped to reach post-secondary success." When Saleem came to the retreat his family joined him for the weekend Laurelville. Saleem was born in Lebanon and has a fascinating story of his birth families' escape during a turbulent time, arriving in the US to settle in Iowa. This was a drastic cultural change. Saleem shared what it was like for him to be the outsider, culturally, religion and nationally. As he shared his story and his faith, he

talked about the tendency to draw a line around what we know. He shared how enriched their lives became when they began to hear the stories of their neighbors. They spent time with those who were different and widened the circle of love. He encouraged us to find ways to work on projects with our neighbors from around Pittsburgh and around the world. We engaged in projects together so we could share stories as we got to know each other. Today we continue to live out this vision in our personal and communal lives seeing that no one is an outsider to God.

After Jesus encounters the Syrophenician woman his ministry will move in a new direction. Jesus will go to the Decapolis, a network of ten Greek cities, where he heals a deaf man with a speech impediment and then Jesus feeds 4,000 Gentiles. This mother's persistence benefitted more than just her daughter. She was instrumental in jump-starting Jesus' ministry to all people.

Elisabeth Johnson reminds us that whatever we were before, whatever labels people give to us, we are now the children of God. We are to open up to the love God extends to us assuring us that Jesus does not leave any of us hungry, sick, and tired. Jesus claims us all as God's beloved children – children from every tribe and language and nation. Even crumbs from the table prove to be enough for our healing and salvation. He provides an abundant, life-giving feast for all. That, my friends, is the Good News.



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

2040 Washington Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15241
412-835-6630

www.westminster-church.org