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Jesus's Apology Tour  
Proverbs 22 | Mark 7: 24-37

Most preachers don't have any business attempting to justify the slur that Jesus uses toward the Syrophenician woman in today's text, certainly not male preachers. There are no excuses to be made for any person referring to a woman in the way related to us here. That the words attributed to Jesus are so out of character explains why there is so much fascination with this incident. It's often paired with such scenes as the child Jesus naughtily evading his parents in Jerusalem, or Jesus turning over the moneychanging tables in the temple, to offer evidence that Jesus was a regular guy. Proof that the son of God we know as divine was possessed by flashes of anger, shortness of temper, and maybe even unattractive prejudices revealed in unguarded moments. We know Jesus was fully human because on three or four occasions in the gospels we glimpse his imperfections. Maybe.

But I've always thought there is more to see here than a character flaw. And stopping there doesn't do justice to the nameless woman in this story who is doing an awful lot of work in the context of Mark's gospel. She appears only briefly. He treats her with hostility. And yet her identity as a woman and as a non-Jewish believer undermines the exclusivist claims of the Pharisees and others in the religious establishment. In Mark's gospel, this non-Jewish woman is the first real example of the Good News of Jesus reaching communities that had never been previously included in the temple's faith and practice.

What if we focused our attention less on what the man in the story says than on what the woman in the story does? Her courage in speaking, her persistence in the confrontation, her agency in seeking the touch of Jesus results in both the

healing of her daughter and the inclusion of her people. Her identity as a woman shows the agency of women in biblical events. Though she is a minor character, we must include her among Mary and Martha and others who influenced Jesus's life and ministry. And consider all the other features of her identity. She's identified as a foreign person, particularly of Syrophenician origin, which means that she is not Jewish. She is a mother seeking care for her child. She is apparently very poor. Her placement in this scene on the floor, beneath the table - to say nothing of Jesus's slur against her - says something about how she is regarded by the polite company. In all this conversation about handwashing and purity and defilement, we are being told that this person is dirty, that she is considered unclean. There is a person at the intersection of all the identities. Beneath these labels there is an individual. There is not just one reason she is not welcome here. There are many reasons she is not welcome here. This complex person claims a place at the table that Jesus has come to set.

Mark presents this scene as an emotional peak in Jesus's recent scuffles with the Pharisees. They first came after Jesus over the table manners of his disciples, who apparently hadn't washed their hands at the ritual meal. The old tradition was that God's favor falls on those who accept these customs. So, can you see how Mark is raising the stakes here? If they are so disturbed that God's blessing would fall on local men who do not wash their hands properly, just wait til they learn that God also loves a poor, foreign woman. What a scandal!

I don't want to make light of this scene because the language that Jesus uses is so vulgar and demeaning. At the same time, noticing the irony in the story helps us to understand what Mark is trying to say. Has Jesus not just told the Pharisees that we are defiled by the things that come out of our mouths and not by the things we put into our mouths? Meaning that it's the awful things we say and do and the harsh ways we treat one another that truly disgrace us. Whereupon, having

delivered this very self-righteous lecture about speaking in love, Jesus immediately defiles himself with his awful words to this woman who seeks healing. So it's comical that Jesus winds up using himself as his own example of what not to say. One can only imagine what the other Biblical women had to say to him about this. Mary. Martha. Maybe other women looking on. "Jesus, remove your foot from your mouth so that you can continue on with your ministry." Or maybe - they prompt him to apologize. One way or another, it's clear that the woman's words change him.

It's anyone's guess whether this incident is accurately recorded for history. Mark is the author of this gospel. We're trusting Mark to represent this dialogue, which he undoubtedly did not hear for himself. It may well be that Mark includes it here because it was such an often told story about Jesus. It's plausible that this incident was carried in the oral tradition of Jesus's life because it was so memorable. "Can you believe Jesus said that to the woman from Syrophenicia?" "Do you remember the time Jesus showed his true colors?" But I think it's more likely that Mark is just telling a story that suits his agenda. His interest is not in representing Jesus as a historical figure but in making an argument about the gospel. In his portrayal of this scene, when the Syrophenician woman stands up to Jesus rather than accepting his dismissal of her passively, Mark makes a point about who is included in the grace of God. It's important to note here the pattern that we're starting to see.

Where the tradition has withheld God's favor from women, this scene clearly shows the grace of God falling upon women. Where the tradition has withheld God's favor from those of over religious understandings, this scene clearly shows Jesus reaching out to them. Where the tradition has regarded foreigners, aliens, or strangers with suspicion or contempt, in this scene we are challenged to extend hospitality and grace to them. Where the tradition has

regarded certain persons because of their poverty or their grooming or their occupation and livelihood merely as dogs, we stand corrected.

We see ourselves reflected in Jesus here. We can see in him our misogyny. Our racism and nativism. Our arrogance and conceit. So where he is humbled before he can carry on with his journey, we are likewise humbled by Mark's insistence that the Gospel extends far wider than our closed hearts want to accept or our small minds wish to imagine.

From the Syrophenician woman, Jesus goes on to extend healing to another man. As he continues on his journey, Mark says that he comes to Tyre "by way of Sidon." That is a very circuitous and roundabout way. It is as if Jesus is on a grand apology tour. He goes to the women who were degraded. He goes to the strangers who were not welcomed. He goes to the Gentiles turned away from the passover meal. He goes to the poor who could not make an offering. He goes to all those who have ever been told they were unclean or that they had been defiled.

He visits with all who have ever been turned away from the presence of God. In this way we have come to know God in human form, that the Holy Spirit may come, and find, and bless every person created in God's likeness and every community given life by God's spirit. We have this grace because a certain nameless woman spoke in truth, that what we know of Christ may stand corrected. Amen.