



Jesus Is Interrupted and Schooled by a Courageous Woman

TEXT
Mark 7:24–30

March 19, 2017 — Sermon by Dr. Rodger Y. Nishioka

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 had gone.

Friends, today we continue our journey with Jesus Christ as he makes his way to Jerusalem. In just three weeks we will be in Jerusalem for Palm Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week. We continue our sermon series about the people you meet along the way when following Jesus. Today our Jesus seems

to be tired. One can hardly blame him. I am sure teaching and preaching and healing are wearying, so it seems Jesus is trying to get away.

He goes to Tyre, a town on the Mediterranean Sea today in Lebanon, about 50 miles south of Beirut. Scholars note this is an odd place for Jesus to try to find rest. It is a Gentile city a good distance north and west from the Galilee. Perhaps that is why he goes there because no other Jews would consider it a vacation site. It is as if you were trying to get away for a weekend, a family reunion perhaps, or even a destination wedding, and you chose, oh, I don’t know, Buffalo.

Jesus is weary and trying to rest. He goes into a home there, but he is recognized, and a woman, a Syrophenician, meaning she is from the Syrian and Lebanese nation (Syro being the ancient name for Syria and Phoenicia being the ancient name for Lebanon) comes to him. She is a Gentile. Her daughter, a little girl, is not well. The Bible says she has an unclean spirit. This tends to be Mark’s code language for one who suffers from serious mental illness.

Today we might say she was suffering from the demon

of depression or schizophrenia or any number of serious mental illnesses. This woman comes to Jesus, bows at his feet, shows him respect, and begs him to cast the demon out of her daughter. Then Jesus says something that is at the very least unkind, if not horrible. He tells her “the children are to be fed first because it would be unfair to take the food meant for them and cast it to the dogs.” He draws a clear distinction here. By children, he means the Jews, like him. And by dogs, he means her. Gentiles ... the others. By any measure, this is a horrible statement.

In the Middle Eastern culture, to call someone a “dog” is an incredible insult. There is no getting around this. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, just made a horrible, insulting, at worst bigoted and even racist statement. He called this woman and others like her a dog — a lesser creature — someone who is not worthy of his efforts at teaching and preaching and, least of all, healing.

See, sometimes we forget that while Jesus was the Son of God and himself, fully God, he was also fully human. I know. I do not understand how that can be either. It is one of the

great mysteries of his identity. But I trust it to be true because if he was only God, then he would know nothing about human suffering and what it means for us to feel sad or to be angry or to laugh and love. And if he were only human, he would be a great moral figure, but then his suffering and death would mean only that another innocent person had been put to death, and his resurrection would have been impossible.

I believe that Jesus somehow is fully human and fully God all at the same time; and perhaps, just perhaps, there are some moments when he leans more to the God identity, and at other times leans more to the human identity. If that is so, then this must surely be a more human moment.

I understand. He is weary and tired. He is trying to take a break and rest, and he is bothered, interrupted, by this persistent, desperate woman for her little girl. She bows at his feet, an act of humility, and she begs him to heal her daughter, and the best he can do is tell her he is here only for the children of Israel and call her a dog. Really, Jesus? Surely, this must be one of his more human moments.

You know this. When we humans are tired and weary, we are not at our best. Our fuses are short. Our tempers flare. We say and do things we regret. Our seeing is not our clearest.

Ten days after the close of the Presbyterian Youth Triennium several years ago, where I had been privileged to preach

at the closing worship service with 7,000 Presbyterian youth and adults from around the world in the Hall of Music on the campus of Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana, I was on a plane with 22 young adults going for a two-week visit hosted by the Presbyterian Church in Ghana. We left from Atlanta and flew through London. We missed our connecting flight, and we ended up on the floor overnight in Heathrow Airport.

We got to Accra, the capital city, tired and exhausted having traveled for 36 hours. It was late at night when we arrived. We were supposed to arrive earlier in the day in bright sunshine, but it was past midnight. Before I left Atlanta with the group, one colleague from the seminary had warned me that security was not the best and to be sure no one took our bags. I am not sure why it is, but that lodged in my mind, and I told the group several times, "When we get to Accra, make sure you watch out for our bags."

I had gone to the store and bought bright green duct tape to mark all of our bags. Sure enough, as we began to deplane, I realized that the baggage handlers had just opened up the cargo hold doors and were tossing bags onto the tarmac. As we were going down the stairs to the tarmac, I yelled to our group, "Get our bags!" And we scrambled along with the rest of the passengers to find our bags.

Once we got them, we made our way through security, and

we found the pastor who was hosting our group. He told us that he had a bus waiting for us, and I yelled to our group, "Follow that pastor and no matter what, do not let go of your bags!" People were jostling us looking for their loved ones. It was chaotic. Some were offering to take our bags to taxis and I yelled at them, "Get your hands off my bags." This was not my best moment.

Then suddenly the crowd parted, and this beautiful young Ghanaian woman stood right in front of me beaming with her arms open, and she said, "Welcome, my brother, to mother Africa."

I remember thinking to myself, "Wow, you're beautiful, but you're not getting my bags." I pushed her aside and was looking for the pastor, and she was persistent.

She said to me, "My brother, why do you not greet your sister?"

I remember thinking, "You are a beautiful Ghanaian woman and I am a big Asian American man. You are no sister of mine."

But she was persistent. Then she said, "Rodger (she said my name!), why do you not greet your sister?"

I thought, "Wow, you're good, but you're still not getting my bags."

Then, as she was walking next to me, she reached into her blouse and took out this cross. It was the same cross I was wearing. We had distributed 7,000 of these crosses to all the participants at the closing

worship service of the Presbyterian Youth Triennium at Purdue University 12 days earlier. She was one of the delegates from the Presbyterian Church of Ghana. I remembered meeting them after worship. They came up and gave me a gift and thanked me for preaching. When I found out they were from Ghana, I remember telling them briefly that I would be traveling there in ten days.

She had returned from the Triennium, traveled one day to her village in Northern Ghana and then turned around to wait for me at the airport. She had been greeting every international flight for the past two days waiting for me. I dropped my bags. I hugged her and said, "Oh, my sister. I am so sorry. Please forgive me for not recognizing you. I am so glad to see you. Thank you for welcoming me home to mother Africa!"

I needed this persistent young woman to remind me that my family was bigger than my limited imagination. And Jesus Christ needed this courageous, persistent mother to remind him that his ministry was not just for the Jewish people but for all.

I am so grateful for the life and witness of this courageous, persistent woman and for my courageous, persistent Ghanaian sister.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.