

## **“Let the Dogs Be Fed” – Mark 7:24-30 – September 9, 2018**

**Rev. Rachel A. Wann**

This story from Mark’s gospel is troubling. Jesus had recently entered Gentile territory for what seemed to be a mini retreat. His purpose was to remain anonymous. Mark tells us that Jesus didn’t want anyone to know he was there. But it didn’t take long for word to spread that the popular, new Jewish rabbi was in town. Learning of this, a Syrophenician woman came to the house and bowed before him. She begged him to heal her daughter.

And in a very un-Jesus-like manner, Jesus insulted her. Perhaps not intentionally, but he insulted her nevertheless. 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.” Now Jesus wasn’t talking about cute, roly polly puppies. Dogs in the first century were not house pets. They were scavengers. They were tolerated, but certainly not considered “part of the family” the way many of us think of our pets. They snatched up scraps in order to survive.

Why would Jesus say this to this woman? Because, in that moment, several things stood between them. And in the culture of the Jews, Jesus had every right to insult her. First off, she was a woman. She had absolutely no status, and for her to even approach and talk to man who was not her kin, was highly frowned upon. Secondly, she was a gentile. Jews and gentiles did not interact, because they were considered to be unclean. Thirdly, she was a pagan. She did not worship the God of Israel, and thus she was a heathen. Gender, nationality, and religion separated Jesus and the woman. And no Jew would fault Jesus for his comment to her.

Jesus was raised in a patriarchal culture that subjugated women on a regular basis. Women had no voice and no status. They were constantly at the mercy of the men in their lives. Additionally, Jews were known as the Chosen People – they believed that they were specially claimed by God. They truly believed they had a monopoly on God’s favor. Anyone who worshipped other gods or lived in an area or part of a tribe outside of Israel were considered “less than.” So by all counts, or at least by all counts that mattered to a Jew, Jesus was not at fault. Jesus literally believed they was nothing wrong in his comment toward her, in calling her a dog. He was being truthful, as he understood truth at that time.

Now I’ve preached on this passage before – and it’s a tough one to make sense of, I’ll admit. But when I read it now, in the world’s present context, it sounds amazingly familiar. So many issues have come out over the last few years. Issues where a particular truth held by those who have power are challenged by those who do not.

The black lives matter movement comes to mind. It came about when an inordinate amount of violence toward people who have dark skin began to be recognized – through videos and first hand accounts – all of a sudden, people, seeing it for the first time, began to question why this was happening. And to bring attention to the issue, the moniker “black lives matter” was born. And suddenly the issue of systemic racism was finally getting noticed on a national level. And then people who have never had to worry about getting treated differently due to the color of their skin began to say, well “ALL lives matter.” But they were missing the point.

And so then football players began to quietly protest by taking a knee during the National Anthem at football games – again, it was done in order to bring attention to the issue of excessive violence toward people of color. But again, instead of seeing the protest for what it was, other people tried to turn it into something it wasn’t meant to be – a backlash against our country’s military forces. But that’s how ingrained racism is in our society. We don’t want to see it, so when it shown to us, we divert the conversation to focus on something else. Of course, all lives do matter, but that includes people with black skin, so let’s take a look at what life may look and feel like through their eyes and in their skin, just for a minute. Let’s open ourselves to hearing their stories – stories we may learn are very different from our own.

And this passage also reminds me of the “me too” movement. Suddenly, the issue of sexual harassment and sexual violence toward women and girls was starting to be recognized and heard. Stories upon stories began to be told, out loud, to others, in public, on social media, in the news. Many men were and still are amazed at the kind of things women have had to put up with throughout their lives – objectification of their bodies, unwanted sexual advances, slut shaming, sexualized comments, sexual assault. I have dozens of stories I could tell from my own life of ways I have been objectified and sexualized simply because I’m female. My earliest recollections come from when I was about eight years old. Eight years old. And I and other women of my generation and previous generations were told that boys will be boys, and that it was just something to be expected and put up with. But along with the sexual comments comes the fear – will this escalate? And we had to learn to be observant of our surroundings and always look for an escape route. We had to be in control of our own safety in case those sexual comments turned into something more. And for many women, it did turn into something more.

These are just two recent examples of how a dominant cultural mindset can blind people to underlying discrimination. A mindset that is so ingrained in our culture, even those who are

victimized or who are on the receiving end of the discrimination often are blind to seeing it for what it is.

The Syrophoenician woman didn't back down against the pervading discrimination that Jesus was showing her, albeit unintentionally. She had no doubt experienced discrimination all her life, but nevertheless, she persisted. And Jesus listened to her. He heard her when she said, "Even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." And in those words, Jesus' eyes were opened. So often he was the one opening the eyes of others to God's truth, and now, this Gentile woman spoke God's truth back to him, and he quickly realized that indeed, God's love, mercy and grace was available to all people in equal amounts. Jesus realized his own collusion to cultural norm of discrimination of his time, and was willing to stand against it and welcome her and welcome all into God's love. May we learn to follow his example. And may we also learn to stand up for other's whose voices have long been silenced.