

Speaking Truth to Jesus

Mark 7:24-37

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If we're being charitable, today's story is an example of a serious Jesus gaffe. Yet, what if wasn't a mistake as we'd like to think? Jesus crudely criticized a woman asking for help. Let's review the Gospel reading. Jesus encounters yet another woman asking for a miracle. It's been a long day; the last thing Jesus wants is another encounter. He ducks into a house hoping to remain unnoticed. Not a chance. With a reputation like his – miracle worker – the world is at your doorstep.

Perhaps he feels his reputation has escaped the Gentile World. He spends his time in Tyre, Decapolis, and Sidon – Gentile areas not known for Jewish congregations. Of course, the Jews hated Gentile societies; the feeling was mutual. The preaching, teaching, and healing miracles may be less expected there. Or so Jesus may have thought.

A desperate mom seeks him out. She has a daughter with some form of illness – unable to leave the house, perhaps bedridden. She could not bring her along to seek a miracle. It would seem the little girl is cut off from those around her, unable to navigate society. Her mother seeks help on her behalf. Jesus recognizes the woman as a Gentile, a lower social caste according to his Jewish upbringing. In fact, she is Syrian-Phoenician, two cultures with extreme disregard for Jewish people. She gets Jesus' attention by bowing down at his feet and petitioning his intervention.

Jesus dismisses her request, retorting, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Did he just call her a dog??

When we reference this passage in many commentaries, our worst fears bear out. Jesus did not just call her a sweet, adorable puppy. This slur intentionally debased her, comparing Syrians to street dogs stealing food anywhere they could. The commentaries also suggest the term "children" demonstrated the privilege of the Jewish community. They would be fed first and foremost; all others could wait or just forego altogether.

This story is hard to hear. It only appears one other time in Matthew as a story with a Canaanite woman but with similar results. Neither Luke nor John touch this story, perhaps because it is so difficult to hear. So why does it show up at all?

Let's look back at the passage again. The mother remains undaunted by the rejection. In fact, she argues that all she is asking for is a mere crumb of his time and effort. In fact, she probably heard that one of Jesus' miracles was feeding the 5,000 with 12 baskets of leftovers. Yet he cannot spare a crumb to save her daughter? Is Jesus a savior for Jews only, or is he salvation for all people? Jesus seems to be not quite clear on his full mission, but the woman is very clear.

The distressed mother has some other dimensions that make this story remarkable. First, she is a Gentile woman addressing a Jewish man, socially beyond permissible boundaries. But she also "gets Jesus." She knew he was capable of performing miracles, but she also understood his basic message when others did not – even the disciples.

Jesus ushers in a life of abundance, not scarcity. She recognizes the abundance in the feeding 5,000 people. She only asks for crumbs, not a banquet. Jesus' rebuff doesn't deter her faithful pursuit. She demands that Jesus come through for her daughter. Perhaps Jesus is still working out just what his ministry means. She helps him enlarge his worldview. She makes no further demands on him beyond helping her daughter. How many of us can express our faith by demanding that God or Jesus or the Holy Spirit step up to the plate? NOW!

Impressed by her rebuttal, he dismisses her to return home and find her daughter healed. On the walk back to her home, she has no idea what she will find. Has her daughter really recovered or was this just a quick dodge for Jesus to get some relaxation time? Thankfully she finds her daughter released from the ills that kept her from her family and society. The miracle worked, but not without the woman's intervention.

We find it hard to criticize Jesus or God. Isn't that blasphemy at worst? Lack of faith on our parts? No wonder two of the evangelists skipped this story. But what would we lose if it never appeared in the Gospels?

Jesus and God both underwent "course corrections" in various Bible passages. We know many of the stories quite readily. Jesus' mother pointed out that Jesus was needed in the kitchen at the Wedding at Cana. Jesus, having a good time, never noticed the dwindling supply of wine. In fact, he asks his mother why it's his problem. Jesus' mother takes over, sending him off to the kitchen, and clearly telling the kitchen staff to listen to her son. "Do whatever he tells you." Spoken like a proud mother!

Does this miracle (or sign) simply solve the immediate problem running out of wine at a wedding reception? Or does it have a deeper meaning about the abundant life that Jesus promises to those who will listen? Yes and yes. It's both. Jesus saves the wedding reception by transforming water into the best wine and lots of it. But it's a sign of what is to come: abundance for everyone. Jesus is fully human and fully God.

Here's another story of changing God's mind. We recall Moses coming down the mountain with the Ten Commandments. The Israelites could not wait for 40 days to get their marching orders. They forged their golden calf instead. Furious, God intends to start over with a new crop of humans. But Moses changes God's mind. He, too, relies on logic to save the humans he loves.

"If you, God, were to destroy the humans, how would that look to the Egyptians, from whom you rescued them?" "What about the oath you took to our ancestors: Abraham, Isaac and Israel? You promised to multiply them like the stars of heaven; they were to inherit land that you, God, would provide forever. How can you kill them off now?" As scripture tells us, "The Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people."

God breaks into the world all the time. We've read many stories in the Bible when ordinary people confront Jesus to the enlightenment of all:

- The woman at the well crosses social boundaries to discover the thirsty man she serves is indeed the God she has long awaited. She immediately spreads the good news in her community.
- The woman hemorrhaging for many years simply tugs on Jesus' cloak as he steps past her on the road. He immediately feels power leaving him with that touch. He turns to her, just ignored seconds before, to heal her condition.

- The woman who persists against an unjust judge. Luke tells of a woman who insists loudly on justice. She remains a thorn in the side of the uncaring judge. He finally relents and grants her request, as to swat away an obnoxious pest. The story is one advocating persistent prayer. Nothing happens without God's input. But just who are we in the story? Are we the widow depending on prayer to set things right? Are we the judge who shuts out the pleas until they become intolerable?

Perhaps we need to dwell on the human stories of our quest for justice. Sometimes we are the desperate mother seeking a cure for our suffering child. Sometimes we're the heartless judge or Jesus who wonders what's in it for him? Do we seek justice for ourselves at the expense of others? Do we counsel even more patience for those who have long suffered? Who do we need to hear in order to become the disciples we wish to be?

We can only hear those in need when we meet them. Many times they walk right past our church doors. They may keep walking when they see only shiny cars in our parking lot without any speck of rust. They may wait till everyone leaves before they dare open the Blessing Box. They may sleep on a park bench across the street.

One way to meet those who cry out is to volunteer. Many of us do. We may have met those without justice while serving meals to them: Meals on Wheels, soup kitchens, cutting up tomatoes for a meal at NEW Community Shelter. Perhaps we met those living in their cars with little access to amenities we take for granted. We may read of yet another fentanyl death, wondering what drives people to seek drugs at all? God sends us all kinds of messages to hear the pleas for help. Like Jesus, we simply have to listen for the unexpected. The cries may blast us like a bull horn on the evening news. Or they may barely rise above a whisper. They may come from a crowd on the streets. The person in the pew next to us may simply shed a tear.

Why is this story in here? Not to show an embarrassing Jesus moment. There are many people for whom this story is exceptionally good news. Those living on the fringes of our society are fully citizens of God's realm as are we. Our world may not recognize them, but this story assures them that they belong. Those long pushed to the back of the line: Black Americans, Native Americans, refugees from all parts of the world, girls, even babies left to die unaided.

The story portrays Jesus as a fully-human being and God. We hope to follow in Jesus' footsteps, to model our lives after Jesus. Maybe that includes allowing our minds to be changed, especially when that change expands God's love. Perhaps we are following exactly in those footsteps, learning to hear the cries of fellow humans and claim our divinity as did Jesus.

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- Rolf Jacobson -- Dean of Faculty; Professor of Old Testament; A.N. Rogness Chair in Scripture, Theology, and Ministry, Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, MN
- Karoline Lewis -- Professor and the Marbury E. Anderson Chair of Biblical Preaching, Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, Minnesota

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