

Motivated Faith!
Sermon for Cashmere Presbyterian Church, Sunday 5th September 2021
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Text: Mark 7:24-30

Introduction:

At first glance, this passage seems to record a sharp and offensive interaction between Jesus and this Syro-Phoenician woman.

I had a sharp interaction with a woman at a supermarket this week. We came out of the shop, me just in front of her. I took my bags of shopping from the trolley and pushed it towards the place where the workers were getting them prepared to be used again, to which the woman said, in the most sarcastic of voices: "Great place to dump your trolley."

My initial thought was to say; "Well I'm glad that I am not in lockdown with you!" But I then realised I had pushed my trolley into the pathway she wanted to take. I forced out an apology: "I am sorry, I didn't realise you were going that way."

On the surface, Jesus' words to the woman were even more cutting than the sarcasm that I encountered! He called the woman in his story a 'dog'. This was definitely an insult in this culture. Dogs were not the cute and highly bred pets we know today; they were usually stray scavengers to be avoided and were seen by the Jews as unclean! So, she comes to Jesus with a request to help her daughter, and he rejects her with an abusive insult!

What is going on here? This is hard to equate with the kind and compassionate Jesus who goes out of his way to help those on the margins and those in trouble!

What is going on? How do we explain his behaviour here? There are some possibilities, and, ultimately, in my mind, a very profound explanation.

First the possibilities:

1. Was Jesus just tired and a little grumpy?

He had retreated to this area north of Galilee, the region of Tyre, in modern-day Lebanon. It was following a particularly busy and taxing time with clamouring crowds, and clearly he wanted some down time and the scripture says 'he did not want anyone to know he was there.'

How do you respond to an explanation based on the idea that Jesus was just tired and grumpy? Some might say his divinity would not allow this possibility. But what about his humanity because don't we also believe he was human, just like us. And do we ever get tired and grumpy after a draining day? So, is this a glimpse into the humanity of Jesus, just a sign of his solidarity with the human experience? I get that! And I am comforted by that because it tells me he understands this common dimension of what it is to be human.

If this interpretation is possible, then the cool thing is that he doesn't stay in this grumpy mood, but rather he emerges out of it into a lovely, cooperative and happy ending. That speaks to me about good, functional humanity – to be able to lift above our tiredness and bad moods when we are called to do so.

So if this interpretation has merit, it teaches us about Jesus' humanity and it models for us a way to rise above the tired, grumpy moods that inevitably assail us in busy and stressful times.

2. Did Jesus just have his priorities right?

While the woman was actually – whether she knew it or not – owning a promise to Abraham that his descendants would be a blessing to all nations, Jesus also knew the progression of that goal depended on his ministry first to the Jews. He says this explicitly in verses like Matthew 15:24:

‘I have been sent only to the lost sheep of the people of Israel.’

It is not that he wanted to confine the gospel message to the Jews. Jesus, after his death, instructs the disciples to take the gospel out to all people everywhere! However, to get to that point, in his earthly ministry Jesus had to focus on the Jews. This is a little complex; it is to do with the transition from Old Covenant to New Covenant, and it has to do with the changes wrought by the cross and resurrection. But the key point here is that it is about priorities and focus. Jesus knew what his priorities were and where his focus was to be, and this gentile woman and her daughter did not fit his priorities right now!

I get this too. There is a business model I have followed over the years called ‘The 4 disciplines of execution.’ The first discipline is to determine your 2 or 3 wildly important goals (WIGS) and then resolutely prioritise them and focus on them. The alternative is to be caught up in the ‘whirlwind’ of urgent activities that rob you of the focus that ensures you achieve what you want to achieve.

I read of an excellent example of this the other day in *The History of Presbyterians in Aotearoa*. In the 1950s, the church embarked on a ‘New Life’ programme, a focussed attempt to breathe life into the church. It was hugely successful in developing the burgeoning Bible Class movement, huge numbers of children in Sunday Schools, planting many new churches around the country, and a growth in church attendance – the figures are quite dramatic. From 1948-1958 there was a 65% increase in people under pastoral care, a 32% increase in people at worship, a 64% increase in young group membership (the Bible Class movement), and a 78% increase in Sunday School attendance! Whilst some momentum continued into the 1960s, the growth curve began to change into decline that accelerated through the 70s and 80s. Jim Veitch, writing in this part of the history, talks about the way protracted and divisive disputes about church union and theology created a whirlwind that took the focus away from new life and growth in the church!

Jesus knew the whirlwind of urgent tasks demanding attention – people were always after him to do this and that. And he knew the set priority in his lifetime on earth was his ministry to the Jews and he set his face intently on a journey that would take him into the heart of their capital city Jerusalem and death on a cross.

3. The interaction wasn’t actually so sharp?

There were lots of cultural reasons for Jesus to simply turn his back on this woman. He was probably alone with her – it was scandalous for a man alone with a woman let alone have a conversation, her daughter was ‘unclean’, she was a Syro-Phoenician. They were sworn enemies of the Jews because they fought with the Romans against the Jews in the Maccabean revolt in the 160s BC. Most rabbis of Jesus’ day would have just ignored her. Jesus engaged.

And we don’t see the body language or the looks in their eyes, nor the tone of voice. Maybe the body language was open and friendly, there was an inviting glint in Jesus’ eyes and an inviting tone of voice? This could explain why the woman was not put off – maybe Jesus was engaging in friendly banter here that is not apparent in the words alone. At the golf club we do that all the time! And if so could be that he is inviting her into a deeper understanding of who he is, who she is, and what it is that he actually has to offer? I like this idea because it leads to a deep insight about Jesus and his gospel message. Let me explain:-

- a) Jesus uses a parable. Many commentators see the words of Jesus - “Let us first feed the children. It is not right to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs” - as a mini parable about the kingdom of God and the immediate priority of the Jewish people.

- b) The woman understands the parable. Not only does she understand it, she demonstrates this understanding by entering into it and expanding it's reach: "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's leftovers."

Which means this:

"I know that I'm a dog" – that is, I am a sinner and have no right to expect your help and salvation.

"I know that there is enough for all" – that is, your gracious love will and does overflow from the table set for the Jews to all people everywhere. And even the crumbs of your grace are sufficient for me!

It is the classic gospel:

I am a sinner and helpless to save myself: Your grace saves me unconditionally.

I am ashamed and lost: You see me and honour me with grace.

I am fearful and afraid and disempowered: You heal me and empower me.

This is remarkable because the religious leaders of the time did not even try to get Jesus' parables, and the disciples struggled to understand them. Yet this woman not only gets this one, she enters the narrative, expands the teaching and finds a miraculous and transforming end result! Jesus heals her troubled daughter by remote control similar to the click and collect method that I am getting my morning coffee at the moment! Stunning outcome.

Why did she understand so much? I wonder if it is to do with motivation. This was motivated by mother love – is there anything stronger! She was desperate for her daughter and ready to engage totally with Jesus. She heard about Jesus, hurried to him, fell at his feet and begged him (the tense here is present, meaning continuous and persistent). She was motivated. It is interesting what motivation does to us. It caused Sophie Pascoe this week to swim the last metres of the 200-metre individual medley without breathing, to give everything she had to the point of black out because she was so motivated to win that gold medal.

I have recently listened to the testimony of a former parishioner from the UK. At the age of 46 he has been afflicted by motor-neurone disease – devastating. Yet he talks of a desperate new motivation in his faith journey that has shocked him out of simply going through the motions of church and his growing spiritual apathy into a hunger for God's presence, peace and healing. And he speaks, as a result, of a wonderful new and uplifting, sustaining relationship with God.

Conclusion

How do you read this story and how does it speak to you today?

Do you identify with the tired and grumpy narrative, worn thin by COVID? If you find yourself in that place be comforted by the knowledge that Jesus knows this place too. But also, be inspired by the way he lifted himself above that mood to help this needy family.

Or do you relate to the point about priorities being made here – is there a whirlwind going on in your life that is preventing you from getting to what is really important? 'Faith, Family, Friends' is a slogan we have over the doorway into our living room, because they are our wildly important goals for life – God forbid that we get distracted from those.

Or is it the deeper gospel message that connects? Tim Keller describes the woman's approach as 'Rightless Assertion'. She knew she had no right to Jesus' help, but she nevertheless asserted her belief in the sufficiency of his grace for her. One commentator I read made the perceptive observation that 2 things prevent us from knowing the fullness of God's salvation:

One is to underestimate our powerlessness over sin, so that we think we can attain righteousness on our own merits – this was the Pharisees' problem, and it is often a problem for us self-reliant Kiwis.

The other is to underestimate God's ability to save; to see ourselves and our problems as beyond his reach.

The woman in this story avoided both these barriers. She knew her need for God and she believed in the power of God to save. And she experienced his saving, healing and empowering touch in an amazing way!