

## **DESPERATE MEASURES**

*a sermon preached by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on September 5, 2021  
based on Mark 7:24-30*

Here is the situation in the story from Mark's gospel, set for this morning: Jesus is operating just beyond the borders of his own land on one of those infrequent occasions when he travels outside of the limits of Jewish Palestine. As soon as he gets over the border into Gentile land he is confronted by an unhappy parent.

Well, *unhappy* is too soft a word for this woman's condition. She is desperate. This woman's daughter is said to have a demon. That means some physical / psychological aberrations affect this girl. We don't know what it is, but it's terrible. And she is sick, and the mother is scared.

The woman is drawn to Jesus. The way she addresses him in the gospel of Matthew's version of the story is especially revealing, because it is very formal. "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David," she says. His own disciples call him "Master." Less frequently, they call him, "Lord," sometimes "Rabbi." But this woman, being an outsider, not knowing what the ground rules are, gives him the whole works.

Remember, she is an outsider to people from Jesus' world, and she knows it. She needs help in the worst kind of way, so she comes to Jesus in utter supplication.

It's understandable. I know that when I go to the traffic court to see if there's any way to get my speeding fine reduced, I'm full of "Yes, your honor." I'm lousy with it. I'm not desperate, but I know being a little obsequious can't hurt me. So the woman says, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David." And he answers her not a word.

Now I know the usual interpretation of this passage goes like this: Jesus is testing this woman's faith. I don't find that to be a very satisfying explanation; not at all. In fact, I can't think of a time in the New Testament when Jesus puts people's faith to some sort of test.

Jesus challenges a rich young man once; tells him to sell all he owns and give the money to the poor. But that is not a test, it is a specific prescription meant to help him cure the unhappiness in his self-focused life.

Jesus doesn't toy with the hearts of people in need. No, something else is happening in this morning's story. There is a disconnect between the two of them here that Christians have found uncomfortable for 2000 years.

Jesus just refuses to answer this woman. Yes, and when she pesters the disciples to needle him for an answer, Jesus finally comes back with an answer worse than silence.

He says, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." In other words, "Sorry, you don't fit into my plans. I am way out here, beyond the borders, trying to round up some stray Jews. But not you; you are an outsider."

But this woman is not put off so easily. Only then does Jesus speak, not to her, but about her, and in her presence. It's an odd moment -- kind of embarrassing, really. Jesus says, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to dogs."

"Ouch!" Now, that would be taken as an insult anywhere, but in that part of the world, it is particularly tough language.

"Dog," in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine is not a statement about a cute, cuddly Border Collie. No, "Dog" means the scruffy scavengers that populate the streets, living off garbage. How callous of him.

Well, this woman comes right back at him. She is resilient, even pushy; determined to get a hearing. She says, "In our houses, even the little puppies that scramble around on the beaten dirt floors are allowed to have the crumbs that fall from the table."

And now Jesus marvels, as he says to those about him, "I have not seen such faith, no, not in Israel."

*Faith?* This Gentile woman knows nothing of the beliefs and traditions of Israel, yet Jesus says that she is a paragon of faithfulness.

Aren't we talking about crude desperation? This is a woman who is at the end of her rope. The text seems to be telling us that when human need becomes desperate -- white-hot and frantic, it is akin to faith. Why? Because God, as we see God in Jesus, is a sucker for the truly desperate, and even more, those who are truly desperate for the well-being of those they love.

What Jesus clearly saw in the face of this gentile woman was a mother who would jump in front of a train in order to save her little girl.

Okay, let's talk about faith now in Christian terms. Some Christians see themselves as guardians of Faith. They may even claim they have a litmus test for determining who is truly Christian, and who are not.

They might say, "You have to repeat a formula and in a specific church -- you have to say, "Jesus is my Lord and Savior." Or they might say, "You have to be baptized by immersion, not by a piddly Presbyterian sprinkling of water on the head."

Well, *faith*, according to Jesus in this story, is not a matter of theology, or ritual, or

Biblical knowledge. It's about somebody being desperate enough out of sheer naked, beautiful love, to let down every pretense, every defense – every *fence* of every kind, and reach out toward someone who can see that in her face. Really, see her.

I will never forget a friend from graduate school named Stu. Stu was the most self-absorbed, self-indulgent guy I'd ever known back then. The University of Oregon had matched us and made us room-mates. I remember arriving at our dorm room and the first thing I saw was a little sign he had put on our door (he got there first) and it said, "A friend with weed is a friend indeed." And I thought, "uh, oh."

I had no problem with anyone smoking pot, I just didn't like the idea that I'd be breathing it 24/7 and also wreaking of it. Graciously he moved out in a week, just across the hall.

Just far enough away so we could become really good friends. He was a great guy; extremely self-indulgent but a great guy.

We remained life-long friends. A couple of years later Stu got married to a woman who knew what she was getting but still adored him. And then he had a daughter, and that is what changed his life. Because one day he spoke to me of magic that had happened in his life. He said, "I used to think of nobody but myself. Now all I can think about is what is best for Sasha." He said, "You know, if I had to, I'd give my life for her without thinking about it for a second."

Consider for a moment that that might amount to faith. To come to see that there is something bigger and more important in the world than we and our private needs are. And then, once that has been fully realized we decide to give all that self-love to the one who will follow after us.

It is to say of our children and grandchildren the same thing John the Baptist said of Jesus: "He must increase and I must decrease," and then be 100% okay with that.

Jesus saw *that* in the desperation of the woman who loved her daughter.

Okay, if you've NOT felt desperate in regard to a loved one, just file this away for later. Someday, life (being what it is) you'll be in the place of this gutsy, faithful woman. It happens to nearly all of us eventually even if we never have kids to call our own.

If you don't see it in full bloom yourself you can at least see seeds of it scattered near and far. A woman in my last church started something in Salt Lake City called, the "Sharing Place."

It's a remarkable place families can take children who have lost a brother or sister. It's a place where they help these kids deal with the unthinkable. I remember a little boy there whose tiny sister had died. He had asked his mother if he too couldn't die, just temporarily, so he could go to heaven for a few days and teach his little sister how to ride a tricycle.

And then there was the little boy who, when asked if he would be willing to give blood to his twin sister (who he was told was very sick and might die) agreed, and when he was on the table and his blood was going into her asked the doctor if, in the act of giving his blood to his sister, he was going to die suddenly or just a little bit at a time.

This is what faith amounts to when Jesus talks about it. It's not about believing stuff. Anyone can do that. It's about seeing that this business of living is way bigger than any one of us; that, in fact, we are all in this together.

That is, of course one of the crucial lessons behind this whole miserable Covid thing. But there are still millions who don't get that; who think individual rights trump the good of the whole. Well, sadly, they are failing the curriculum of the pandemic.

The Syrophenician woman says, "Lord, never mind about the puppies eating the crumbs under the table, and the fact that I am a gentile. My daughter is sick. For goddsake, help us. She is my life." And Jesus says that for such things and such people I have come into the world.

Good for him, but look, it's important for us to remember that in the beginning he was cold to her. In the beginning, he seemed to believe that his mission was confined to God's chosen community, the Jews. In this story we see that a desperate woman became a lever to pry open his heart, and open up his ministry, open it up to the whole earth.

Interesting isn't it? Even Jesus can have his sights widened.

Well, the apostle Paul once said that when Jesus came to this earth he emptied himself, taking on the form and mind of a human being. In him, in the midst of his humanity, we are supposed to be able to see the beating heart of the living God. But, as this story teaches, maybe not right away. Like the rest of us he was a work in progress.

I mean, look, in this story from the gospel of Mark this gentile woman out-Jesuses Jesus. Go figure.

The story suggests that we all need to think outside our usual boxes, from time to time – that even Jesus needed to do this once in a while.

You know, we all of us need to be reminded that we don't know it all; that we need, at the end of the day, the wisdom of others who we might otherwise dismiss to make life bearable for every one of us.

The Lutheran pastor, Nadia Bolz Weber, once said something particularly interesting. She said that every time we draw a line between us and others, Jesus is always on the other side of the line.

On that day with the outsider, the Canaanite women, Jesus saw through his own human tendency to divide and judge and opened himself up to God's tendency to be a soft touch; to be full of grace and mercy.

Referring to this text, Barbara Brown Taylor once wrote, "Let go! Step out! Look a Canaanite in the eye, knock on a stranger's door, ask an outsider what his life is like, trespass an old boundary, enter a new relationship, push a limit, take a risk, give up playing it safe! You have nothing to lose but your life the way it has been...with Jesus as our model and our Lord, we are called to step over the lines we have drawn for ourselves, not because we have to, and not because we ought to, or even because we want to, but because we know that it is God's own self who waits for us on the other side."

Speaking of dividing lines, this last week the legislature of the state of Texas drew a line between women considering abortion, and themselves, and they did this in the name of God believing that only they, themselves, and people who think like them, are true Christians, not those on the other side of that line.

One could argue that Jesus was once on the Texas legislature side of that line until a gentile woman talked him into erasing it all-together. She was invisible to him, you know, until she appealed to the deepest part of him, the God part; the God part that cares about the widow, the orphan, and the immigrant; that cares for all mothers and their suffering daughters -- the God part that is for anything that helps people.

The Texas legislators don't get that. It's in their Bibles but they somehow missed it. God said, "Do Not use my name in vain." But they used God's holy name to draw a line and drive a wedge between compassionate people on both sides of the issue of abortion. And there are compassionate people on both sides who sometimes compassionately agree to disagree about such things. But the Texas legislators are using God's name for their own political gain and we see through them.

The God I worship doesn't draw dividing lines. The God I worship is for pregnancy testing for poor women and families. The God I know in Jesus is for diagnosing and treating disease in victims of rape and sexual assault and does not blame them for being

victims. The God I know cares for women who need contraception but can't always get it.

This God is for educating young women about their own bodies. This God is for women, period.

So let's not just look the other way when these politicians take God's name in vain. When they say "God is pro-life," let's say, "Yes, and God is **pro-woman**, too. God is **pro-health care**. God is **pro-education**, even when it involves sex (which, btw, God created and is probably also for). God is **pro-families**, and pro-planning them too.

Okay, enough of that. I hate giving precious time and band-width to self-serving politicians. I don't want to end the sermon here. I want to go deeper.

You know, behind this text, behind Jesus's wake-up call, there is the truth that we too often draw lines in the sand trying to divide ourselves from others, but it is a fool's errand. Reality, real life, is deeply interrelated; it's a web of interrelatedness. But we forget this.

Nelson Mandela often spoke of the African concept of *ubuntu* –*Ubuntu* can be described this way. It means, "I need you in order to be me, and you need me in order to be you."

As Dean Koontz has said, "None of us can ever save himself; we are the instruments of one another's salvation, and only by the hope that we give to others do we lift ourselves out of the darkness into light."

Think of it this way: the gentile woman in the story this morning needed Jesus desperately, and you know, in the end, Jesus said that he needed her just as much.

Who then are we to think any differently about life? Today, right now, think about when you opened someone's hard heart by something you said or did; someone who had first underestimated you. It's happened. And think also of someone YOU underestimated who opened your hard heart and your closed mind and made you think and feel a whole new way. Who is "the other" who needs you today? And who might you need, maybe desperately like Jesus needed that desperate mother?

Amen

**Sandy Ruff**

Sat, Sep 4, 4:29  
PM (16 hours  
ago)

to me

Hi Scott,

I am on a tuna canning marathon this weekend so won't be at church tomorrow nor be available at Zoom time. I would like to lift my granddaughter, Emilee (who is Troy's - my son who died- daughter). She was recently diagnosed with Crohn's disease and started an infusion regime, returned to college in Phoenix last weekend, tested positive for COVID on Friday, and was hospitalized late Friday night with a severe kidney infection. She will be on antibiotics for 3-4 days to see if they can get it under control. Her mom, who lives in Sherwood, is flying down tonight to at least be closer to her, but of course can not see her in the hospital, but she will be able to talk with the physicians.