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Good morning,

I find this morning's text challenging to listen too. It is one of the many stories in the Bible that causes me discomfort and unease. Particularly the lines in verse 26-27: **Now the woman was a Gentile of Syrophenician origin. She begged [Jesus] 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."**

I've heard it preached on from a couple different angles and I have never left the church with my mind and heart completely at rest. Reading this passage from Mark, my instinct told me to try and explain away Jesus' initial reaction to the Syrophenician Woman, or better yet look further down the list of lectionary texts and pick something else to preach on this Sunday avoiding this unfortunate encounter all together.

I used to believe that if I was uncomfortable with a particular verse in scripture, it was because I was reading it wrong. I hadn't spent enough time with it yet, or I was too ignorant to read the passage properly. I'm sure that sometimes that's true. But I've started to realize that when something causes me hurt or pain, it's not usually because I'm too ignorant to understand what's going on here. Rather it's because I recognize a piece of what's going on here.

I think that an important challenge for people of faith is to find space to sit in the discomfort of the broken spaces of our world - and in our scripture - and bear witness. We can't always have a perfect answer for how to respond, or a line to sugar coat the harshness of something in front of us. So we are going to spend a bit of our morning sitting in some discomfort and working through this text.

The Gospel of Mark contains many healing stories, all of which highlight Mark's narrative of inclusion, marking it a cornerstone to the new social order being constructed by Jesus. All the typical miracle story elements are present in this story as well, we have a problem, there is action for solution, followed by confirmation. But in this story the conversation takes over the narrative, and instead of sitting in awe of a healing, my heart sinks. This particular story takes place within a larger

conversation happening in Chapter 7 around what is clean and unclean, our scripture today highlights two such individuals.

We have the Syrophoenician Women and we have a Man who cannot hear. Both are outcasts in polite first century Jewish society, both are doubly unacceptable: the first being both a gentile and a women, the second being unable to hear, and having a speech impediment. In the context of this scripture both these people would be considered unclean.

So why does Jesus' respond so differently in his initial response to each. You've already heard the words towards the woman, so lets look at what the response is to the man in verse 32-34: **They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. (Jesus) took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened."**

So.. that's not the same. To be fair Jesus also heals the daughter of the Syrophoenician women, he 'comes through' in both cases. But both of these individuals reached out to beg Jesus, and I don't think they were greeted at all in the same way. One is treated immediately, while the other person is greeted initially, with resistance. There is a difference here that should make us uncomfortable, that is not acceptable and doesn't fit with the ideology of inclusion that Mark emphasizes. That our faith emphasizes.

This is the part of the Sermon where I'm suppose to show you the answer behind the magic curtain of research that relieves all of the discomfort you might have right now. Alright, lets try on some of the typical avenues:

The first thing that I found in commentaries was the discussion of the term "Dog" used here. It is often noted that this word is translated to a diminutive dog, that is a small or household dog. The pet dogs that are under the family table are not strangers, they are loved - just not as much as the children. While this may initially appear to have a softer inflection than other terms that might be used for dog, this word when directed to a human was still usually used as an insult to degrade those its directed towards. Whether the word sounds more like puppy or mutt, the phrase doesn't transform into a compliment with linguistic gymnastics.

Our next move with difficult texts can be to try and delegitimize their authenticity. We've already talked about translation, but maybe whoever recorded this story got it wrong, or at least the line with Jesus was written down differently. A problem with this is that the same story also appears in Matthew 15. Other elements of the story have shifted but in verse 26 we have the very same line "**It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the Dogs.**" This quote seems to have stuck. We can't claim that this story is just completely made up either, in fact most commentators state that this account has a high claim to authenticity because it's awkward, and doesn't seem to match the usual message of the Gospel of Mark. This is such an unusual portrayal that its inclusion implies that it was starkly remembered and passed on.

Our third line of defence that's often used is to turn our focus to the wonderful representation of women in this story. I don't want to dismiss this point, these verses depict a woman whose love for her child motivates her to cross social boundaries on behalf of a daughter that is unable to advocate for herself. She is clever, and reverses the prejudice presented to her. She is willing to diminish herself, to be the least, if it means she can serve her daughter's need. She displays a willingness to engage the 'other', she hears Jesus' rebuke, and answers back on his own terms, without relinquishing the legitimacy of her claim. Her role in this story would serve to show early readers a woman who is present, passionate, and an agent in the bringing about of a new social order of inclusion. All of this is beautiful and important to acknowledge. However, I don't think that the richness of this representation is able to erase the harshness of Jesus' words. They are two separate conversations to have when looking at this text, and so we will get back on our original path and leave the celebration of this woman for another day.

So now all we have left is to turn to Jesus, and hope to find some answers here. We can jump to defend Jesus in numerous ways. The first few verses let us know that Jesus was setting out to find some alone time, away from the pestering crowds. He is exhausted by the mission that fills up every second of his life and is attempting to find some time for restoration. This woman isn't even Jewish. I'm sure everyone can relate to the despair of being completely exhausted and then being approached for yet another thing. I'm married to someone who is an introvert and needs time alone to restore, but just imagine this for a second. Say Matt has had a terrible day, and is looking to hide away for some rest. A woman that he does not know, comes

up and asks him for something that he is able to give. And his first response is to call her a Dog. Whatever his next actions are, there is no way that is a defensible response. So we're ditching the Jesus was tired line.

The next is to focus less on the whole 'dog' thing and to emphasize the ground breaking way that Jesus engages this woman in a conversation, a debate! The initial rebuff from Jesus would not only be understandable to the early reader but expected; no woman, and especially a gentile, unknown and unrelated to Jesus should dare to invade his private space to seek a favour. And really this phrase is actually leaving space for future gentile mission, I mean the dogs will eventually get fed right? Conceding to debate with a woman in itself would have posed radical changes to cultural sensibilities. This line is not something I would be comfortable presenting to every audience. Certainly not something I could ever say if I was trying to explain this chapter to a woman who is not christian, or is a woman of colour, perhaps from another country. I think this is too weak a response to be the take away message, so I'll move on.

The last common defence for Jesus is that all he is doing here is trying to protect his ministry to Israel. Some commentators start going into how really the Syrophoenician people weren't great to the Jewish people along lines of property, so we should be talking about how Jesus is the underdog in this conversation and his rebuff is the same as other rebuffs to authority. The problem with this is that regardless of if that is true, the male-female dynamic would over throw the ethnic power structure at play in this patriarchal society. Even if that weren't the case, Jesus doesn't greet any other requests for healing with the harshness depicted here, including requests from gentiles or others in position of authority.

At this point the chance of finding a calming answer behind the magic curtain is pretty bleak. But this is scripture, and Gospel, and Jesus, and I know that there is still good news here. There is within this text an example for me to follow, not just in the brave steps of the Syrophoenician women, but also in the actions of Jesus. So what can we learn from this statement that was made, now that I've exhausted the avenues for explaining it away.

The conclusion I've settled into may be a little controversial, and its absolutely messy and incomplete, but I have found something. What if the example that Jesus gives us here is the display of Jesus' ability to reevaluate and reconsider. What if

this text helps to show us both the very real barriers that divide people, and what it looks like to overcome them. Maybe in this text we are actually gifted with the opportunity to read how to wrestle with our initial instincts, and to be present in our own teachable moments, to choose a better way. Maybe Mark 7 lets us see Jesus in his genuine humanity learning how it is he will overcome a boundary.

In other stories we see Jesus overwhelming his opponents in an argument, but here he allows the woman's reply to stand. The fact that the woman wants to argue her point would have deepened her previous affront to Jesus. The expectation would be for her to receive another cutting retort. Instead Jesus allows himself to be 'shamed,' he submits to her logic and chooses to align himself with her side of this debate rather than digging his heels in and defending his first reaction. The miracle that shines through this story is not the eventual healing, but the overcoming of the prejudice and boundaries that separate these people.

Jesus is always reinterpreting the law to apply it into specific circumstances, and at every point he ends up settling on the way that best serves people, the way that allows for the most complete vision of loving ones neighbour. Even when the way that allows for the most love is presented to him, rather than by him. Rarely are we so gracious when our own understandings of mission and service are challenged by someone else. It is more likely that we get defensive, rather than humbly listening to what our challenger has to teach us. In Mark, Jesus attributes this woman's healing not to her faith but to her victory in argument, verse 29 **Then he said to her "for saying that, you may go - the demon has left your daughter."**

Jesus is not stubborn or obstinate, and is not above taking a lesson from an 'undignified' source, from a person that by all social standards is beneath him. This is a great reminder for all of us in how to give up our position, in favour of a better way. Jesus chose to submit in order to include a gentile woman in the new community of the kingdom. Our communities would do well to suffer the indignity of redefining our group boundaries in order to realize how to continue making the church a place in which no one is turned away.

It's not accidental that the next healing is hearing and speech. Jesus' ministry is one of liberation, it sets us free from the real restrictions. He releases us from our pride and stubbornness, so we can always be listening and affirming the way that allows for the most love to be brought into this world. It's the liberation of a humble heart.