

From Daughters to Disciples

Women's Stories from the New Testament

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The Outcasts

THE SYRO-PHOENICIAN WOMAN (Mark 7:24–30*)

If hundreds of people lined up for a glimpse of you, if they wanted to shake your hand or have a brief conversation, or if they wanted to ask you a favor or take a selfie, would you be energized? Or exhausted by the mere thought of it? Your answer may reveal whether you are an extrovert who draws energy from people or an introvert who is replenished by solitude.

Consider the members of the British royal family who attend events where hundreds of people wait for a glimpse, an acknowledgment, a handshake. Extroverts might thrive on those activities. Introverts, whether they are royals, teachers, or preachers, can often perform well enough in groups, but they are likely exhausted afterward and eager to be alone.

I wonder if Jesus was an introvert. There were always so many hurting people touching him, begging for a moment of his time, or asking for healing. Jesus also spent hours in conversation with the clueless disciples, who did not understand his mission and ministry. Jesus was present for all these people. He paid attention. He cared for them. He gave them the healing and the wisdom and the affirmation that they

* The story of the Syro-Phoenician woman also appears in Matthew 15:21–28.

sought. But in this story, he was tired. He left the crowds and went to a quiet place where he could be alone to rest and recharge.

He went to a town where more Gentiles than Jews lived, hoping no one would recognize him as a healer. Gentiles were non-Jewish people. For most of their history, Jews had kept their distance from Gentiles, who were considered different, dangerous, and undesirable. The Jews were God's chosen people. The Gentiles were not.

Even in a Gentile town, Jesus could not escape notice. A Gentile woman learned where he was staying and came to ask a favor. This woman is labeled Syro-Phoenician in Mark and Canaanite in Matthew. She was an outsider. She would not be considered one of God's chosen people. But she was a mother on a mission; she did not care much about religious and ethnic identities. Her daughter was ill with what was then called demon possession. Now the disease might be labeled epilepsy or mental illness.

The woman had been watching Jesus from a distance. He had a caring presence and a gentleness about him. He did not shake one hand while looking ahead to the next person in line. He looked people in the eye and gave them his full attention. He was compassionate. People felt important and valued around him. Healing was not a business for Jesus. He did not demand adulation or payment. She had been watching from a distance. But now Jesus was in her neighborhood.

The woman took a risk approaching Jesus. It would have been more socially acceptable if the girl's father, grandfather, or uncle had made this request. But if there was a man in this family unit, he was not asking any favors for the girl. The mother had to make the request herself.

She knew she would be out of place and out of line if she asked a man for a favor, but she thought of her daughter's pain and isolation and told herself that it couldn't hurt to ask. At worst, he would say no. She went to the house he had entered and fell down at his feet, a typical sign of humility and gratitude. She may have intended to be rational and respectful, but her words tumbled out. "Please, sir, I know you are very busy, but I see that you heal people and I wondered if you could help my daughter who is very sick." Then she waited. Jesus looked at her for a long time, and it was not a comfortable silence. Finally he said, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs" (Mark 7:27).

She was stunned. What kind of answer was that? Was this gracious man calling her a dog? He was Jewish and she was not, but would he say no to her because of her ethnicity? Apparently he would! And

harshly! She imagined the aggressive wild dogs that lived near the garbage dump and survived on scraps that people threw away. Was that how he thought of her? She felt humiliated and wanted to escape before he could humiliate her even further. She had badly misjudged him. He was not kind, but rude and dismissive, and there was no point in further conversation. She was not about to beg. She knew when she wasn't wanted.

Then she thought again of her daughter's discomfort and discouragement. She thought of the amazing power of healing Jesus possessed. She thought about the crowds of people who were constantly asking something from him, and she found a bit of empathy for Jesus. Of course he was tired and irritable. And maybe he had priorities she did not understand. She also thought of the affectionate dogs in her childhood home who were quick to gobble up any dropped crumb. Maybe it was not so insulting to be compared to a household pet. She tried to see the world through his eyes, but she also refused to give up and slink away quietly in disgrace and shame. She persisted. She talked back. She used his own words to reframe the situation. "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs" (Mark 7:28).

The woman realized something Jesus may have forgotten in his weariness. There was enough grace and healing for all. She was willing to be in second place, willing to be compared to a dog while the Jewish people sat at the table, but she knew that even a crumb of Jesus' power was enough to heal her daughter.

Jesus listened to her response, even though he had just spoken harshly to her. When he listened, he realized that she was right. There was enough of God's power for all: Jew and Gentile, insider and outsider, children and dogs. He did not have to limit his healing ministry to the Jews.

This woman showed deep faith in him, despite his brush-off. She knew her daughter did not need to be in the same room with Jesus to be healed, because divine power was not limited to proximity. She believed in Jesus, even when he was not at his best. Jesus acknowledged her faith. "For saying that," he said, "you may go—the demon has left your daughter" (Mark 7:29).

What are we to make of this story, which shows Jesus in a negative light? The gentle Jesus seems a little snappy here. One commentator said that he was caught with his compassion down. He had run out of patience and refused to heal upon request. That seems completely out of character for Jesus.

Commentators and preachers have tried to find a good explanation for his behavior. Some claim that Jesus was testing the woman's faith. He intended to heal her daughter all along but wanted to see the depth of her trust. Some commentators suggest that he had a twinkle in his eye or a smile on his face, and insist that she knew he was testing or teasing her. The story, however, gives no evidence that Jesus winked, joked, or teased, only that he said no.

Is it possible that Jesus learned something from her? Perhaps he was still working out the details and recipients of his ministry and did not think it was the right time to expand beyond the Jews. He thought he needed to care for the Jews first, and he had not yet completed that work. Could she have helped him see differently? Did she convince him to change his mind? Did she show him that there was enough love and healing to go around to Jews and Gentiles?

Some people hesitate at this idea. They insist that Jesus was fully divine and knew everything. He did not need to be instructed by a Gentile woman, of all people! But Jesus was also fully human. This is one of the great mysteries of the Christian faith. Jesus is God-made-flesh, but he is also a human being, and human beings do not know everything. Jesus could grow and learn and change just as all humans do. When the woman challenged him to expand his view of ministry, he did not ignore or argue with her. Instead he demonstrated personal integrity, self-confidence, and willingness to learn from someone who was "beneath" him. It is not a sign of weakness to change our minds or expand our view of the world.

Diving Deeper

Reframing the story: When Jesus refused to heal her daughter, the woman's first instinct might have been to conclude that Jesus was right and she was wrong. She should not have bothered him. She was an outsider and her daughter was not worth healing. She might then have backed away muttering apologies. She might also have concluded that Jesus was not a healer but a crabby man who did not want to be bothered, and she should escape as quickly as possible.

Instead, she told herself a different story. She dealt with this awkward situation by reframing it. She found some empathy for Jesus. She took a put-down and turned it around. She did not conclude that she and her daughter were worthless. She did not conclude that Jesus was

mean-spirited. Instead, she sensed his reluctance, his weariness, and his sense of mission, and she responded to those deeper concerns with creative empathy. She recognized that a dog could be a beloved member of the family rather than an angry wild dog at the trash dump.

We often make assumptions about what other people think. If a boss, spouse, child, friend, or coworker snaps at us, we might assume they dislike us or are angry because we have done something wrong. We tell ourselves a story to explain their behavior, but the real story may be completely different. The teenager may be bullied at school. The spouse may have had a bad day at work. The boss may be worried about the bottom line. How do we try to listen to the story people are not telling? To the pain that is driving the angry words?¹

“Nevertheless, she persisted.” This phrase has become a bit of a cliché since a male US senator used it to criticize a female senator for refusing to sit down and be quiet. Still, it has resonated with a lot of people, and it is a good description of the woman in this story.

When we are ignored or patronized or criticized or demeaned, it is tempting to slink away and avoid further conflict, or to shut down and refuse to engage. Why waste our time with people who won’t listen or don’t understand? Why engage with people who call us dogs—or worse? This woman did not back down. She talked back to Jesus. She stayed in the conversation with him, and in the end, she helped him see differently. She persisted in the face of rejection because she believed in Jesus and wanted healing for her daughter.

Feminist theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has frequently criticized the Roman Catholic Church for its refusal to ordain women to the priesthood. She is often asked why she does not simply leave and attend another church, and she replies, “Because it is my church.” Other people have disagreed with their denominations over women’s ordination or same-sex marriage or racism, but rather than break the relationship, they have persisted. They believe that the denomination can be better, and more gracious, so they refuse to leave. Their persistence can be a gift.

The same is true for those who challenge their country’s practices on race or immigration or taxation. Those who persistently criticize do so because they think the institution or the congregation or the nation needs to be true to its ideals. They call it back to its goals or its theology or its original intentions. Persistence can be a gift.

It is also important to know when to stop persisting and leave a difficult situation. Jesus was a worthy opponent who was willing to listen

to this woman. Ideally, the church or the nation or the institution is a worthy opponent willing to listen to criticism and willing to change. Unfortunately, some opponents are not worthy and might do serious physical or emotional harm to those who persist. In situations where there is a threat, it may be better not to persist. It is not always easy to discern the difference.

Talking back to back talk. Jesus initially refused to heal the woman's daughter because Gentiles were not the priority of his ministry. She did not accept that answer, and she challenged him to be more inclusive. She reminded him that there was enough grace to go around. She talked back. Jesus listened to her, changed his mind, and healed her daughter as she asked.

What might Jesus have done instead? He might have dismissed her as an angry woman he could safely ignore. He might have shut the door in her face. He might have defended his approach to ministry and insisted she was wrong. Instead he listened, and he took her seriously.

How do we respond when someone talks back to us? Your partner or child might get frustrated and say harshly, "You never listen. You are always on your phone!" Or, "You're so negative." Those are hard words to hear, perhaps not framed in the most helpful way. How do we respond? Do we get angry and stomp away? Do we offer a countercharge about the other person's bad behavior? Do we accuse them of exaggerating? Or do we go quiet, take the criticism to heart, and conclude that this is more evidence that we are bad people, while still refusing to change our behavior?

What if we could listen to the back talk and try not to be so defensive? Some of the hardest but wisest words to say in these situations might be, "Can you tell me more?" Or, "You might be right." What if we could put ourselves in the other person's shoes and think about why they are criticizing us?

It is also difficult to hear someone accuse us of being narrow-minded or racist or sexist or homophobic. We can dismiss the criticism as hysterical or silly. We can leave the conversation and refuse to engage further. We can take the criticism as further evidence that we are bad people who have no power to change our bad behavior. These responses are common, normal, and human, but they do not promote healthy relationships.

When a person of color confronts a white person about white privilege, it is easy for the white person to get tense and angry and defensive. The white listeners might get their feelings hurt. Or insist that

they are not racist. Or the listeners may take the criticism to heart and acknowledge the accusation and feel bad but not really repent or try to engage or make amends. But often those sharp, honest, direct words are exactly what privileged people need to hear and then act on.

What if we could be more open to people who disagreed with us? What if we assumed they have something to teach us, even if it is difficult? What if we did not shame them in response?

On a private Facebook group that discussed religious and church issues, a young, gay person of color often pointed out examples of discrimination and injustice in the broader church. He also sometimes confronted individuals for their comments that he considered racist, insensitive, or insufficiently supportive of marginalized people. There were some tense moments and some hard conversations, but his persistence helped people see how their words and actions affected others. They would have been unlikely to hear such criticism in their families and workplaces.

Lewis Smedes describes a friend who, on his deathbed, pointed out some flaws in Lewis that he hoped he would address. Smedes writes, "If you wonder where God's grace can be found, find yourself a critical friend. A friend who wants you to be as good a person as you can be, a friend who dares to confront your flaws and failures, and then accepts the whole of you in grace."²

Self-care and life-work balance. How do you manage all the demands in your life? How do you refill the energy tank after it is empty? Jesus is sometimes held up as a model of tireless and perpetual motion who constantly cared for people with never a thought for himself. Those who try to follow Jesus now are sometimes told that they should be equally selfless and hard-working. This story shows that Jesus did take time for self-care.

During my first year of graduate school I was also a full-time interim pastor. The congregation wanted me to stay and expressed a lot of appreciation, which was intoxicating. I told my adviser about my dilemma: I wanted to focus more fully on graduate work, but the church members said they liked me as their pastor. My adviser smiled and said, "You're not indispensable, you know."

I have remembered those words numerous times in the last thirty years when I have been tempted to take on yet another committee or "opportunity." We all have a lot of demands on our time and energy: work, aging parents, young children, church, volunteering. Much of it is good and important. But we are not indispensable, and we are called to care for ourselves as Jesus cared for himself.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

If you are dealing with a difficult situation, how do you know how long to persist? How do you know when to leave a toxic situation?

How have you dealt with critics? How do you offer criticism or a rebuttal or disagreement? How do you discern when criticism is valid and when it is not?

Do you think Jesus could have changed his mind? What does it mean for Jesus to be both human and divine?

The woman suggested to Jesus that there was enough grace to go around for everyone. Do you believe that? Are there limits to God's grace?

THE REMAINDER OF THIS CHAPTER

IS NOT INCLUDED IN THIS EXCERPT