

Karen Hollis
Sermon – Mark 7:24-37
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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

I did ministry at a large church in Seattle for a few years – our staff meetings were 12-15 people. It's a lot of voices around the table, lots of opinions. One of my colleagues used to play a game with himself to make the meetings bearable. He would listen for his own opinion to be expressed from within the group before speaking up . . . it wasn't that he was shy about sharing his opinions. This approach not only made space for other voices around the table, but allowed him to listen for the truth that was bubbling up in the room. Sometimes it's predictable. Do you sometimes anticipate what people will say on a particular topic? Have you ever sat in a group talking about climate change, for instance, ticking off the various perspectives we've heard so many times, as people share? Yep, that's true, we have to consider that, too, that's a big road block we haven't figured out . . . and we're always wondering, is it too late? Once in a while we're surprised – ooh, that isn't something I've thought of – wow, that really moves the conversation along, or that really challenges me.

Jesus is famous for having surprising, even edgy conversations. Last week he took on the Pharisees, seriously challenging their traditions and practices, after which he gets out of town. He flees northwest, all the way out of Galilee, into Syria and all the way to the coast to the port city of Tyre. He hides out in someone's house, not wanting to see anyone. Of course, the Good News will not be contained.

We know little about the woman who engages Jesus in this short, yet dynamic conversation. We don't even know her name, so for the purposes of this sermon I will refer to her as Adriana. Adriana is known in the church as the Syrophenician woman – we know she was born Greek and lives in Syria, within an ancient civilization called Phoenicia. In other words, she's not Jewish, so she is Gentile. We know she is

a mother and is capable of being bold and clever. When Adriana hears Jesus is in town she wastes no time looking for him and bowing before him, begging for his help. Jesus' response is unsettling to us, shocking even. He calls Adriana a dog and refuses to heal her daughter. What she says and does is equally shocking in their context, and the result of their interaction has huge implications for the wider community around Jesus' ministry.

I love this story for who Adriana is, for Jesus showing an edginess to his human nature, but I was angry with him this week. I wondered, given the way he treated Adriana, if Jesus has time for me. I prayed to Jesus and remembered . . . context is everything. There is much to unpack about this story, so hang with me.

The first context to consider is that of Mark, the author of the gospel. While the gospel is inspired by God, it was written by a person who never met Jesus, about 35 years after Jesus died. Mark ministered to a community of mostly Jews, but also some Gentiles. So Mark has to find a way to include the Gentiles in Jesus' ministry. He uses these two healing stories in this morning's reading to demonstrate Gentile inclusion in the mission of Jesus.

One might ask, weren't Gentiles included from the beginning? No, no they weren't. To understand that, we have to go back to the context of Jesus, himself.

Jesus ministry is first directed toward the lost sheep of Israel; he came to deliver a message to the people that their long awaited deliverance was at hand. Jesus believed that when Israel is redeemed by God, the rest of the world will be, as well – including the Gentiles. So Jesus is focused on Israel, he doesn't have a lot of time and needs to communicate a clear message to his intended audience. Gentiles are only a distraction from that mission. Over the centuries, we have come to understand Jesus as the

fulfillment of prophets like Isaiah, from the song we just played: “[God] has sent [Jesus] to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”

All of this is true for Jesus, and yet Adriana bows at his feet, a Gentile woman. Perhaps Jesus is put off because she didn’t send a male family member in her place; perhaps he is put off because she is a wealthy Gentile in a region where Jews are struggling peasants; perhaps the author, Mark is the one who is put off. Jesus uses a metaphor to respond 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.” The children are the children of Israel – Jesus understand himself to be sent first to them. The dogs are the Gentiles. But she turns the metaphor right around on him. Jesus, if you’re going to use a feeding metaphor, let us not forget that children are messy eaters and crumbs always make their way to the ground, where the dogs eat them up.

Jesus is moved because Adriana is a Gentile, but she gets it – she has faith that God’s promise is for her daughter, too. Many of Jesus’ own followers who have spent months, maybe years with him don’t understand his ministry, but she does. While he knows God will transform Israel and the world with it, he cannot deny this truth in her now. Athletes talk about needing a worthy opponent to really know what is within them, to really embody their best. In the course of the short interaction between Adriana and Jesus, a more fundamental truth emerges and it deeply effects them both. He says to her, “for *saying* that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter.”

I wonder where the voice of Adriana is heard around the world today. She is in a Syrian Refugee Camp in Lebanon, standing in line to get medical care for her child; she is a parent at the Mexican border whose son has been taken from her; she is an Indigenous woman in Canada whose daughter is missing;

she is an climate change activist, speaking out for a future for our children. She shares her truth clearly and unapologetically.

Some of us have this particular call to speak truth where it needs to be heard. Perhaps you can even think of a time you were uniquely positioned to speak a particular truth into the world. What impact did that have on those around you?

I wonder what each of us is now uniquely positioned to assert. What truth has God put on your heart? What truth is essential for your life, for the life of your children? Perhaps the opportunity to share will present itself.

Look at the effect of Adriana's voice speaking her truth to Jesus. She recognizes Jesus as the healer of all and challenges him to embody that now, not later. Perhaps she is an inspiration to those who are not sure they have what it takes . . . or feel too tired to fight for it anymore. When the mystery of God shows up, you will be heard, and in God's mysterious way, God will respond. Thanks be to God.