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Challenge  
 Mark 7:24-37

In my reading about this passage, commonly called the Syrophenician woman, I found one pastor who preached this text as part of a series he called, “Things I wish Jesus never had said.”

It made me laugh because I’m right there with him. The Syrophenician woman throws herself at Jesus’ feet, begging him to save her daughter, and he insults her.

This text provokes a righteous response. It makes me want to go, “O no he didn’t...” The dogs, Jesus? Really?

I don’t think he was trying to be funny or cute, either. I’ve seen dogs in parts of the world where there is a lot of food insecurity, as there surely was in Jesus’ day. When people don’t have enough to eat, animals don’t get fed like they do around here. They aren’t often kept as pets. More often than not, dogs are left to fend for themselves, to scavenge for their supper. They become skinny, skulking things that travel in packs and chase poor unsuspecting girls as they pass by on their bicycles, not that I’m speaking from personal experience or anything.

In this text, Mark highlights the sharp divides between Jewish Israelites and pagan Greeks, between men and women. Interpreters have tied themselves in knots trying to explain away Jesus’ ugly response to the woman – Some, like the mystic John Chrysostom, have guessed he was teaching her a lesson, provoking her to have stronger, more determined faith. The famed William Barclay supposed Jesus’s words were softened by a compassionate twinkle in his eye.<sup>1</sup> Right.

You know what I think? I think Jesus was just being human. He was tired! He’d been on the road, followed by crowds, teaching and healing everywhere he went. He was tired and worn out and had a moment that was all too human – he snapped. Have you ever said something and instantly regretted it? Maybe that’s what happened. Even if the interpreters of yesteryear are right, and he did have good intentions when he said this awful thing, he’s not off the hook. If the #metoo movement has taught us anything, it’s that intentions don’t matter nearly as much as what you actually say and do. The interpreters can spin this however they want, but it’s still a hurtful, harmful statement. Jesus’s biases are showing, big time.

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<sup>1</sup> Both cited in Placher, William, *Mark*, Belief Theological Commentary on the Bible, Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2010, p 105.

Plenty of research has been done to examine the ways our social location and experiences subconsciously impact how we think about other people. Implicit bias shapes our views of race and culture, our likes and dislikes, our judgments about people's character and abilities.<sup>2</sup> If you think you are immune, visit Project Implicit<sup>3</sup> and take a test – or just take my word for it – not even Jesus was immune.

I am amazed by the woman's response. Instead of ducking her head and leaving, embarrassed – she is courageous. She artfully challenges Jesus' bias, turning his words in such a way that he is able to see her with new eyes. He realizes he was wrong to dismiss her, wrong to shut her out. And he heals her daughter. He makes it clear that in the Kingdom of God, there is room at the table for everybody. In doing this, he paves the way for the expansion of the early church to include people who weren't Jewish.

The capacity to change is a gift from God. The ability to learn from our mistakes, to change our minds, to admit when we are wrong, and to try to do better – these are part of being human. One of the qualities historically ascribed to God is immutability – God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. The theory goes that if God is perfect, then why would God ever need to change? But maybe one of the impacts of the incarnation is that God *does* change – God *is* changed, in relationship with us, just as *we* are changed in relationship with one another and with God. Maybe that's exactly what happens here – Jesus, fully human, fully God, realizes the extent of God's love for the world – love that includes all people, no matter where they're from, no matter who they love, no matter what they look like or the language they speak or what they believe or doubt. God's love that extends even to a Syrophenician woman who is brave enough to challenge him, to change him, by helping him realize his biases.

I think we might be on to something here, because the next story shows a different kind of Jesus. He's a changed man. Jesus encounters another Gentile in need of healing, and instead of insulting him and sending him off, Jesus meets him right where he is and with dramatic flourish, he heals him. The healing is our clue that something is different. It's fascinating – Jesus has just healed the little girl from a distance, with no words at all save her mother's tenacity. But now, Jesus uses hocus pocus mumbo jumbo to get the job done. What is he doing?

The text tells us the man was deaf. He couldn't hear Jesus's words of healing, so Jesus enacts the miracle, in body/sign language the man can see and understand... enabling the man to hear and speak clearly again. What might this be telling us? Why does Mark include it here? Maybe because when we realize we've been wrong, it isn't enough to just change ourselves. We must also enable others to see and hear and tell the truth of their experience, too. Having been transformed, we must go and do likewise.

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<sup>2</sup> Banaji, Mahzarin and Anthony Greenwald, *Blind Spot: Hidden Biases of Good People*. Delacorte Press, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> <https://implicit.harvard.edu>

Maybe you can identify with Jesus in this story – either you have unexamined biases, or you are held back in some way by your sense of propriety or even fear. Maybe you are just worn out and have said something you shouldn't have.

Maybe you are like the woman, so desperate for healing that you are willing to confront God herself to beg for a miracle. Maybe you are so sick and tired of the lines that have been drawn around who is in and who is out that you dream of a place where everyone is welcome. A world where there is enough for all, more than enough for children and especially for dogs.

Maybe you can identify with the man who can't or doesn't want to hear any of it.

The good news for all of us is that wherever we find ourselves in these stories, there's hope for us yet. No matter how we might try to box it in, God's power will not be contained. God's power would not be constrained by Jesus' cultural bias. It wasn't held back by his sense of propriety; it wasn't stopped by his fear of scarcity, not by his exhaustion or even by his short temper or hurtful words. Despite all of this, God's power healed the girl and changed Jesus's understanding of who was welcome in the kingdom. So we, too, can have hope that through us -- sometimes despite us -- despite our short tempers, or hurtful words, or hidden bias, God is at work – to heal and to mend, to reconcile and make new.

Jesus encountered the Syrophenician woman and the man who couldn't hear or speak clearly because he was travelling in unfamiliar territory. By following the Spirit's leading into the world, Jesus was challenged, changed, and compelled to live out his transformation. This fall, I hope we will follow his lead. I hope, through our learning and fellowship and service, we will put ourselves in places where we are not comfortable, where we are challenged to discover new things about ourselves and admit our hidden and overt biases. I trust that God is already at work in and among us to change us into the church we are meant to be, the people God intends for us to be.

Next weekend, a group of about 50-60 people will gather here at church. They call themselves Kids in Birmingham 1963. They grew up in Birmingham during the terrible events – the world-changing, liberating civil rights movement - that rocked our town in the early 1960's. They connected mostly online to tell the truth of what they experienced during that time. They share stories of their youth – their memories of the marches, the arrests, the bombings, the terrorism, the activism, the unrest. Some of you can tell these stories, too.

This group is intentionally diverse, with both black and white people coming together to share and remember, with the hope of building bridges of understanding, and seeking healing and even reconciliation. After the group decided to spend part of their time here, one participant called the church. He shared with me his reluctance to come back to Birmingham. He was skeptical about meeting at a majority white church, especially given the systemic racism that exists in our current culture. I think I understand his hesitation. But I told him about you. I shared with him your work to confront racism and

bias – your recovery of historical memory during the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary event. Your ongoing work to learn and be challenged, studying the New Jim Crow and engaging with the work of the Equal Justice Initiative. I mentioned your support of Faith in Action Alabama’s work to confront and dismantle systemic racism, and ARLA and Alabama Arise’s efforts to regulate payday lenders. I told him about your vision of a church that truly welcomes those whom God welcomes, that reaches out to and serves our neighbors in new ways. And he was encouraged. He was surprised. He’s coming.

We are shaped by the water we swim in – not even Jesus was immune. But God’s life giving, healing power is real and it will not be contained. God’s power is at work in this place to break us open to the world around us, to help inspire new dreams of justice and inclusion in this place.

Outside, on the wall of the chapel, is an interactive art installation that was started by some folks during Vacation Bible School and finished up just this morning. It’s a chalkboard that asks, *What’s your dream for Birmingham?* All weekend, people have been sharing their dreams for the city. What’s yours? How might we be shaped by God’s dream of a house of worship for all people, a table that is big enough for all? After worship, I invite you to go outside, and to write YOUR dream for our city on the board. When we have the courage to name our dreams, God’s power just might open a way to make them reality.