

## SPEAKING UP

Mark 7:24-30

*A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on the Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time, September 9, 2018, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.*

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*From there [Jesus] set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syro-phoenician origin. She begged him 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.' But she answered him, 'Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.'*

*Then he said to her, 'For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.' So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.*

*Prayer: It has been said of Dante: "He used his language to discover the world anew." May You, O Lord, who came to us as Word Made Flesh, lead the language of scripture and sermon, prayer and praise, anthem and announcement, to "discover our world anew." In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.*

In Shakespeare's profile of King Richard III, who ruled England from 1483-1485, the playwright explores why the young king was among the most tyrannical of England's rulers. Shakespeare attributes Richard's adult tyranny to the psychological scars he received from having been born with grotesque physical features, including premature teeth and curvature of the spine. Richard describes what he learned later in life of the reaction to his birth:

*The midwife wondered, and the women cried  
"O Jesus bless us, he is born with teeth!"*

*And so I was [he says], which plainly signified  
That I should snarl and bite and play the dog.<sup>1</sup>*

In addition to his jarring physical features, Richard was rejected by his mother, the Duchess of York, a fact his political opponents used against him. His deposed predecessor, Henry VI, says to Richard:

*Thy mother felt more than a mother's pain—  
And yet brought forth less than a mother's hope.<sup>2</sup>*

This combination of severe physical impairment and maternal rejection drives Richard to become one of the most brutal dictators of his day.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare, *3 Henry VI*, 5.6.74-75.

<sup>2</sup> William Shakespeare, *3 Henry VI*, 5.7.49-51.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Tyrant: Shakespeare on Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2018), 53-65. The above citations come from Greenblatt.

## I.

In our scripture reading for today, we have the *polar opposite* of maternal rejection of a less than healthy child.

A woman who is ethnically Greek, but who lives as a foreigner in Syro-Phoenicia, a region near Galilee, has a young daughter who is possessed by a demon, a broad term used in the New Testament to describe any number of what we might say were illnesses mental or physical, but threatening to human life.

The mother hears that a rabbi and healer named Jesus has come to her region and is staying in a home. She likely does not know that he has come to this foreign territory for *anonymity*, for rest and replenishment after a period in which he has “fed the multitudes, healed the sick, liberated the demon-possessed,” confronted the leaders of his own tradition, and been “mocked and rejected.”<sup>4</sup>

Whatever the woman has heard about Jesus, it is likely the part about “liberating the demon-possessed” that catches her attention and leads her to leave the sickbed of her child to venture to this man whose ethnic and religious heritage she does not share.

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As we read or hear this story, watching the woman leave her daughter’s tent, we cannot help but wonder:

- Who will look after her daughter?
- Is there a father in the picture?
- Nanny?
- Grandparent?
- Neighbor?
- Older sibling?
- Might the girl have a seizure and choke if left alone?
- Does the mother risk her daughter’s life in trying to save her daughter’s life?

The text is silent on these questions but our imaginations are not.

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The woman finds Jesus, bows at his feet, and “begs” – not “asks” but “begs” – him “to cast the demon out of her daughter.”

Now what happens next is shocking and disorienting to us, as it has been to readers of the New Testament ancient and modern.

Jesus says to the woman:

*Let the children be fed first,  
For it is not fair to take the children’s food  
And throw it to the dogs.*

These are some of the harshest words found in scripture. They violate our image of who Jesus is. They are so harsh they drive some away from believing in him, keep others from ever embracing him.

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<sup>4</sup> Debi Thomas, “Be Opened,” Posted on “Journeys with Jesus,” 9/2/18, available at <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/1907-be-opened>.

The writer Debi Thomas says:

The Jesus I grew up with was perfect. He had to be, because the theology we constructed around his *deity* required it. “Perfect Jesus” was *technically* human, but his incarnation fell several steps short of *actual* human-ness. He never messed up, never fell short, and never had to say he was sorry. He always had perfect reasons for saying the things he said and doing the things he did. So, if he happened to speak with harshness rather than compassion? If he behaved in ways that were ethnocentric and rude? If he called a hurting, pleading woman a dog? Well, he had perfect reasons for doing so.

But there is something in this particular woman, this Syro-Phoenician mother that does not feel compelled to accept the terms of her initial encounter with this “Perfect Jesus.”

*Sir [she says],  
Even the dogs under the table  
Eat the children’s crumbs.*

Jesus then says:

*For saying this,  
You may go—  
The demon has left your daughter.*

Debi Thomas picks up:

The problem with “Perfect Jesus,” of course, is that he doesn’t exist. The Jesus who appears in the Gospels is not *half*-incarnate. He is as fully human as he is fully God. Which is to say, he struggles, he snaps, he discovers, he grows, he falters, he learns, he fears, and he overcomes. He’s real, he’s approachable, and he’s authentically one of us.

The “Good News” [she concludes] is not that we serve a shiny, inaccessible deity who floats five feet above the ground. It is that Jesus shows us — in *real* time, in the *flesh* — what it means to *grow* as a child of God. He embodies what it looks like to *stretch* into a deeper, truer, and fuller comprehension of God’s love.

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Now it has always been a matter of speculation among theologians and Biblical scholars as to exactly when Jesus knew he was the Son of God. In his pre-existence at creation?<sup>5</sup> At birth?<sup>6</sup> When he was found in the Temple at age 12?<sup>7</sup> At baptism?<sup>8</sup> At the Transfiguration?<sup>9</sup> Debi Thomas’ words lean in the direction of Jesus learning *along the way* if not *who* he is as the Son of God at least *what it means* to be Son of God. It is a view that from time to time parts of the church have deemed heretical.<sup>10</sup> But her words fit *this text*, in which Jesus stretches “into a deeper, truer, and fuller comprehension of God’s love.” The Syro-Phoenician woman speaks words which help Jesus “discover his world anew.”

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<sup>5</sup> John 1:1-18.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 1:8-25; Luke 2:1-7.

<sup>7</sup> Luke 2:41-52.

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22. Note in the final two, the voice of God addresses Jesus, saying “You are my son...”

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36; II Peter 1:16-18.

<sup>10</sup> I am anything but an expert in this subject, but see this website if you like for what I think is a responsible summary of the heresies and the church’s responses to them: <http://coldcasechristianity.com/2017/historic-heresies-related-to-the-nature-of-jesus/>.

## II.

So what's the point of all this? As I said of an earlier sermon this summer, this isn't a Mother's Day Sermon. But it is a sermon about maternal, parental, even grand-parental love. It is a sermon about how such love can be ever so close to God's love. It is a sermon about how the love we have for children is akin to the love we receive from God.

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As the body of Christ in the world, it is important for the church to embody and foster such love.

- Children in our highly-programmed, merit-focused culture need it.
- Children rendered refugees by war and natural disaster need it.
- Children in our day and time who receive nervous parental coaching on what to do if someone opens fire in their school need it.
- Children who hear what can happen even at the hands of those who wear the collar, lift the cup, serve the bread and wine need the parental love of God expressed through trusted and trustworthy adults.

This is part of why we are here on this Sunday to welcome children and youth and families back to the church year. It is why we have an Associate Pastor Nominating Committee seeking an Associate Pastor for the Christian formation of children, youth, and adults. It is why we commit time, talent, and treasure to the church and its building, its staff and ministries, its mission in our nation and abroad: that children in Alexandria and Arlington and North Dakota and Appalachia and Kenya may experience the demonstrated, spoken, embodied love of God through the love of parents and parent-like adults.

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Earlier this week Ben Hutchens plopped down in my office and said: "Is there any way we can get adults from the congregation who aren't parents to serve as choir moms and dads?"

"Sure," I said, as if it were a simple matter. "Just ask them."

A few hours later he sent an email announcing the addition of two new "choir parents" for Wednesday nights: Parents a bit more advanced in age than those who normally serve the pizza and assist the keeping of compassionate order, but a couple who will bring their own grandchildren from outside the church and stay to demonstrate the parental and divine love the church offers all children, bread that is more than crumbs from the Table.

## III.

Since I began this sermon with a story of maternal love denied, I want to end with a story of maternal love provided in abundance.

Many years ago I knew two men who at the time were in their seventies. They were boyhood friends and remained close throughout their lives. Both were highly driven, highly successful, benefactors of their community and its arts, educational, and religious institutions.

One of the men had been severely disabled since an illness in early childhood. It was painful to watch him walk. It was painful to try to understand what he was trying to say in a conversation.

His friend once shared with me that when the two of them were teenagers, trying to figure out the meaning of life and God and their own bodies and their futures, his disabled friend had asked him – in a rare a moment of male vulnerability – if he should run off and join the circus.

“At least then,” he said, “people would have to pay to stare at me.”

He did not join the circus. He went to college. He went to an Ivy League graduate school. He became CEO and Chair of a Fortune 500 company.

His friend also told me what I already knew through observation.

- The mother of the man who did not join the circus was utterly committed to her son.
- She lived to be 103.
- I conducted her funeral, mercifully, a few years before her son’s death.

Even in her *final* breaths of life, she spoke with praise and pride and gratitude for her son.

Maternal love – parental love – akin to the love of God.

Amen.