

Blessed are the Fierce
Mark 7.24-30
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Pentecost +16B
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“Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything.”

How many times have we seen these words over the past week? Sharing the already iconic image from Nike? Hearing, again, the debates between those who support the kneeling protest and those who find it offensive. Seeing the contrary or humorous memes that quickly appeared across the internet. Watching an angry counter-protest against the first protest by arguing that protest is un-American and then cutting Nike swooshes out of socks and burning shoes made across Asia to prove a fidelity to America. Nike shoes burned while Nike stocks soared; Colin Kaepernick’s protest becoming a transformational conversation that will not be ignored or forgotten.

Then just yesterday, Serena Williams got into a much-calmer-than-anything-John-McEnroe-ever-did argument with an umpire who had taken a point away from her due to an angry outburst and then accused her of cheating by communicating with her coach during a match. Williams took issue with his accusation, walked to his seat and said, “I don’t cheat to win, I’d rather lose.”

Fierce protest. Fierce self-respect. These moments spark conversations about racial inequity, police brutality, gender norms, and justice. Both images are guides into today’s gospel reading as we are challenged by a mother begging for her little daughter and Jesus seemingly mocking her and refusing to help.

We studied the beginning of Mark before summer and then stepped away for several chapters as we dipped into Hebrews for 10 weeks. It’s a short gospel, and you can easily sit down this week to read these 7 chapters to see the rapid-fire pace of the book, noting each *immediately* and paying special attention to the pairs of women in chapters 5, 6, and 7 who take hold of situations—grasping the edge of

Jesus' cloak or the head of John the baptizer on a platter—and changing the course of their lives and the lens of Jesus' worldview.

You may recall in our Hebrews study that the Hebrews Preacher has a very high Christology—lots of emphasis on Jesus belonging to the heavenly realm, high above, seated at the right-hand of the father. Well, here in Mark 7, we see a very human Jesus, an earthly Jesus, a Jesus who is tired and maybe hangry. A Jesus who goes away to another region, enters a quiet house, and does not want anyone to know he was there. Jesus is exhausted and in need of a retreat, but he cannot escape notice. Before we get to the fierceness of this mother, let's have a drop of empathy for Jesus who speaks when he is hungry and tired.

We may not know what it is to heal the sick and raise the dead and lead the disciples, but we know this moment. The door has barely closed, he sits down and begins to exhale, but he cannot escape notice. The woman finds him, pushes her way into his presence, takes a vulnerable, humble pose before him, and begs for her daughter's life. She is not Jewish. She is from a different region, a different ethnicity, a different culture. And she knows who Jesus is and what he can do. She knows this is her daughter's only hope, and she throws herself at the exhausted, hangry Jesus' feet. And he is not kind. Or gracious. Or patient. Or compassionate. It's a pretty un-Jesus-y moment, in fact, as he says, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

New Testament Scholar (and BTSR professor) Scott Spencer observes, "Amazingly, the woman plays out her assigned role and turns it against Jesus: 'It's not just the streets and alleys where we dogs wait for the garbage to be thrown out. It's inside the house, too, under the table where we lap up the crumbs your well-fed children drop from their mouths. That's all I want for me and my daughter' (7:28, paraphrase). At this remarkable statement—'for saying this' (7:29)—Jesus changes his tone and announces her daughter's deliverance, which the woman confirms upon returning home (7:30)."¹

Something happens in Mark 5-7 that changes Jesus' mind, expands his awareness, and ultimately alters the shape of his ministry. We are right to hear echoes of God's

¹ F. Scott Spencer, *Dancing Girls, Loose Ladies, and Women of the Cloth*, p. 64

interactions with Israel as God changes God's mind or repents. Jesus is being shaped by his interactions with the people he loves and serves, by the strangers who are drawn to him, by the fierce women who advocate and fight for themselves in a culture that does not value their lives. Spencer notes, "Amid stark differences of ethnic identity, social position, political intent, and moral outcome...desperate mothers and/or daughters take matters into their own hands to compel reluctant male authorities to achieve their—the women's—goals and fulfill their desires. Working within a system where men are expected and empowered to lead, these remarkable women and/or girls make sure the men move in the direction they—the women—want things to go. In short, whatever the culturally choreography, the women of Mark 5-7 take over the dance, and the men follow their lead."²

My Southern people, listen up. Way too often we value being polite above all else. For goodness sake, I was literally taught as an adolescent girl how to enter a room and sit down in a chair so that my backside never faced a group of people. A 13-year-old girl being taught to make herself smaller and hide herself from the world because that physical self is offensive. We have these rules of propriety that sometimes seem fun and harmless. But we have made an idol out of politeness. We have made our manners a god and a commandment, "Thou shall not offend thy neighbor by speaking the truth. Thou shall not make thy neighbor uncomfortable by naming the micro and monstrous injustices that we can actually address and repair." A dear pastor friend disagrees with my willingness to speak about social justice issues loudly and boldly and consistently—NOT because he believes with the dangerous pastors out of Dallas who created that ridiculous manifesto AGAINST social justice—but because he knows members of his congregation will be offended, therefore it is not POLITE to do so.

Let's repent of that notion right now. Because to choose our Southern preference of the polite over the prophetic is to believe in nothing because we do not want to sacrifice everything. It is to cheat the game because we are terrified we might lose. Meanwhile, our children are literally and metaphorically dying, and we need to kick in the doors of heaven and city hall and the white house to fight for their healing.

² Spencer, p. 66

That brilliant poet and artist, Jan Richardson, writes, "'When it comes to saving what needs saving, being merely nice and pliant won't win the day, or the life. Sometimes we need to dig in our heels and do some hollering.' [She] wrote those words...reflecting on the gospel story of a woman who risks everything to save the life of her child," and adds, "I'm revisiting that story today, praying we will know where to dig in our heels for the life of the world. This is a blessing for that:

STUBBORN BLESSING

Don't tell me no.

I have seen you
feed the thousands,
seen miracles spill
from your hands
like water, like wine,
seen you with circles
and circles of crowds
pressed around you
and not one soul
turned away.

Don't start with me.

I am saying
you can close the door,
but I will keep knocking.
You can go silent,
but I will keep shouting.
You can tighten the circle,
but I will trace a bigger one
around you,
around the life of my child,
who will tell you
no one surpasses a mother
for stubbornness.

I am saying
I know what you

can do with crumbs
and I am claiming mine,
every morsel and scrap
you have up your sleeve.
Unclench your hand,
your heart.

Let the scraps fall
like manna,
like mercy
for the life
of my child,
the life of
the world.
Don't you tell me no.³

Friends, we know how Jesus must have felt when that door closed, and he finally sat down. We want so badly to rest awhile from caring and fighting and pushing and advocating. We want to focus on the part of our faith that is nourishing spirituality, comforting prayer, breaking bread at the table, embracing sabbath, delighting in the company of friends. But that's not all there is to this. That's not all there is to us. We know there are mothers knocking at the door who need our advocacy and care. And we know that times often call of us to be the ones kicking the door in and arguing our way into justice, equity, and compassion. The consequences for the world are tremendous. The consequences for Jesus are tremendous.

The Syrophenician mother "holds [Jesus] to his vow of loving service and increases its scope," Spencer notes, as evidenced by Jesus first feeding miracle of five thousand men (before he meets her) and a second feeding miracle (after) of four thousand *people* with "seven baskets of leftovers...The dogs are getting much

³ Jan Richardson, *The Cure for Sorrow: A Book of Blessings for Times of Grief*, "Inspired by the fierce woman of Mark 7/Matthew 15"

more than crumbs now from Jesus. He has learned his lesson well.”⁴ The breadth of Jesus’ ministry expands. His awareness grows. He is changed by the women who grab his cloak, knock on the door, fiercely advocate for healing. The Syrophoenician woman knows Jesus can heal her daughter because she has seen how he loves, has heard how he moves, and she seems to know even better than he does what Jesus the Christ is capable of doing. Because of her fierceness, nothing is ever the same again—for Jesus or for us.

Be blessed in your fierceness, my sisters and brothers. You might change more than the world. You might change the very mind of God. Amen and amen.

⁴ Spencer, pp. 67 and 65