

*St. John Lutheran Church*

*The Sermon*

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Mark 7:24-37

The Gospel lesson for today contains one of the most difficult, maybe disturbing and certainly fascinating stories about Jesus in all of Scripture.

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus engages in what the scholars call verbal sparring. Verbal sparring is a kind of wrestling match, in which people do not wrestle, grappling with arms and legs. Instead, they wrestle, grabbling with words. It is a wrestling match of words.

Jesus frequently engages in a wrestling match of words. Just last week, Jesus wrestles with some Pharisees who criticize Jesus because his disciples do not follow their interpretation of tradition. Jesus responds by saying that the Pharisees use tradition in such a way as to block human healing and wholeness and connection and community, when in fact, tradition is meant to strengthen human healing and health and connection and community. So Jesus wins the wresting match of words.

Another well known example of Jesus in a wrestling match of words occurs when the Pharisees ask Jesus whether it is lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not. Jesus says, "Give to the emperor what is the emperor, and give to God what is God's." This raises the question, "Well, what is God's? Is not everything God's? If everything is God's then what, really, is the emperor's?" So Jesus wins that wresting match of words too.

Jesus always wins the wresting match of words, except in one place. Only one place: Here, in this Gospel lesson for today, Jesus loses.

Jesus goes up north to the city of Tyre. This is north of Jerusalem, north of Judea, north of Galilee, north of Nazareth. This is out of Jewish territory, on Gentile land.

There, a woman bows down to him. The Greek says she falls down at his feet and asks him to cast a demon out of her daughter. Mark takes care to tell us that she is Greek in her cultural identity. That meant she probably spoke the Greek language, dressed like a Greek woman, acted like a Greek woman, not a Jewish woman.

She also probably had higher status in the Roman world than did a Jewish woman, because the Romans loved Greek culture. They imitated Greek architecture, Greek philosophy, Greek poetry. They even rearranged their religion to look more like Greek religion. This woman would have had some status in the Roman world.

Also, she might have been more wealthy than most Jewish women. After all, she comes from the city, not the country. She comes from a prosperous and busy port city, not a landlocked town like Nazareth.

Nevertheless, if you have ever had a son or daughter who is possessed by something, or a mother or father, possessed by alcohol or drugs or weird conspiracy theories or a mental condition that you just can't get ahold of, you don't care about your position in society. You don't care about your wealth. You are desperate, like this woman in the Gospel lesson for today. You will do anything.

So she asks for Jesus' help. Now, I am sorry. Many scholars try to get Jesus off hook here, try to make him look nicer than he actually is. You know, because Jesus is always nice, isn't he? Jesus is just a swell guy!

But Jesus is not nice here. Jesus says, "Let the children be fed first for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

Many scholars try to get Jesus off the hook. They remind us that the Greek word Jesus uses here is not the word for a full-sized dog like the half wild dogs that ran the streets. The word Jesus uses refers to a house dog, a puppy, a little dog a lap dog.

I'm not sure that helps much. Now Jesus is calling this woman a little dog.

Other scholars say, "Well, Jesus is just trying to test this woman's faith." Maybe, but can you show me anywhere else in all of Scripture where Jesus tests the faith of a

person who needs help? Where Jesus tests the faith of a person he is about to heal? I can't find such a place.

No. Jesus is being blunt here, rude. Notice, he does not say "No" here. He does not refuse. He's just saying this woman has to wait. "Let the children be fed first," he says.

Many of us think he is referring to the children of Israel, who are having a harder time of it than the Greeks. Jesus is saying that they go first. Because you know, God loves all of us. But God is particularly concerned with those of us who don't get enough to eat. God loves all of us, and, at the same time, God is particularly concerned with people who don't know if they are going to have a roof over their heads next week.

So God is going to attend to them first. Those of us who have enough to eat and a reasonable expectation that we will have a roof over our heads next week, might have to wait. The world does not revolve around us. God does not exist to serve our needs. Sometimes Jesus is blunt with us. Sometimes Jesus is rude.

That's the disturbing part of the Gospel lesson for today.

Now comes the fascinating part. Notice what the woman says. Does she say "Okay Jesus, I'll wait"? Does she say, "Never mind, Jesus, that's okay"? No she does not. She does not disappear into a corner like a fading flower. She does not retreat into silence.

Nor does she come back at Jesus with her fists swinging. That would be the popular response nowadays, to say, "How dare you put me down, how dare you imply that I and my cultural group are like little dogs. Your cultural group is like little dogs. Your cultural group bad!" she might say.

But she doesn't. What does she say? Notice, she accepts her place as not the most important person in the world. But she does not give up, either. She persists. She says, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

In other words, there are still crumbs. Now.

There is enough healing in God's abundance, now, for both the children and for me. Maybe we don't have to wait. It doesn't have to be the Waldorf Astoria. It doesn't have to be given in a silver spoon. Crumbs are enough.

So often we think there is a limited amount of grace, a limited amount of value or care. If we think too much about those people over there then somehow there won't be enough for us. That's not true. God's abundance is beyond imagination.

"Even the dogs eat the children's crumbs." And Jesus says, "For saying that, you may go. The demon has left your daughter." And she goes home and finds her daughter in the bed, the demon gone.

The woman has won. She has prevailed in the wrestling match of words. Not only that, she has changed Jesus's program. Before this passage, Jesus only preached and healed in Jewish territory, with one notable exception. After this passage, Jesus immediately goes to the Decapolis, Greek territory, Gentile territory, and gives a man the ability to hear and speak there. And immediately after that, Jesus feeds four thousand people on Gentile territory, just as he feeds five thousand people on Jewish territory. This woman has changed Jesus's practice.

This is not unique in scripture. People wrestle with God and win all the time. Jacob wrestled with an angel or something or other at night, in the dark by the river. He pinned it and said "I will not let you go until you bless me!" It blesses him and changes his name from "Jacob," which means "Usurper," to "Israel," which means "Those who wrestle with God."

People wrestle with God all the time. Just read the Psalms. People cry out, "God, when will you help us?"

Tell me, do you wrestle with God? It's okay to wrestle with God. It's part of the journey.

I have seen some of you all wrestling with God. Lately, I have seen our children wrestling with God. When I get together for children's events and youth events, I ask folks if they have anything they would like to pray for. Here is what I hear at children's and youth events. They ask me to pray that the Covid-19 pandemic should go away.

Sometimes I hear some of us ask, “How do we get children and young people into the church?” Here’s a pretty clear answer: You listen. You listen.

God has sent us a very clear way to make the Covid-19 pandemic to go away. It was developed during the Trump administration. Did a great job, in record time. They developed a vaccine. God has sent us a way. Have we used that way? No, we haven’t.

So now our children are wrestling with God.

Are we willing to wrestle alongside them? Or are we going to leave them to wrestle alone?

Are we willing to get our vaccine? Are we willing to wear a mask? Are we willing to keep on pushing others to get the vaccine? Are we willing to wrestle alongside our children?

Or are we not? And if we don’t, what kind of message does that sent to our children and youth about how important they really are to us?

Here is some good news. God wrestles with us. God is persistent. God’s relentless grace wrestles and wrestles with us. God’s wrestling with us will never end, not until we become a part of God’s mercy.

Thanks be to God.