

Staying in the Conversation

Mark 7: 24-37

When I'm sitting in a large airport, I sometimes wonder whether a famous person might walk by. Would I recognize a famous person? Can a person whose face is everywhere really walk through an airport and escape notice? Probably not. And I think that would be terrible. Imagine all the people wanting selfies. It would be exhausting.

Was Jesus exhausted by his fame? That's the picture I get from today's text. Seven chapters into Mark, Jesus slips into an unidentified house in a non-Jewish region, and the text tells us he "did not want anyone to know he was there."

How'd that work out for him? About like you'd expect. According to the text, "he could not escape notice." So of course, somebody finds him—somebody who wants more than a selfie. This woman has something to say, and she is going to keep talking until Jesus hears her.

What makes people stay in a conversation—especially an argument—when it seems to be going badly for them? A lot of times we *don't* stay. Instead of standing up for our point, we might throw up our hands and say, "FINE!" in the voice that means it is *not fine at all*, and storm out of the room. Now our anger feels more important than our point; now we'd rather be angry than heard.

But sometimes, a person really sticks with it. They might be facing overwhelming odds; might be rejected at every turn; might even be insulted; but they will stay in the conversation until someone hears. They will keep on talking as long as they believe that somewhere, someday, someone will hear. And so they keep talking. Hope runs out on the day they decide that no one will hear.

For the woman in today's Gospel story, hope had not run out. How long had she been seeking her daughter's healing? Weeks? Or years? How many people had this woman already asked for help? How many times had she been disappointed?

There *were* people she could go to. Like every culture, first-century Palestine had its theories of disease, cause and cure: not much science involved, but plenty of religion. In the non-Jewish region of Tyre, where this story takes place, the culture was probably saturated with pagan gods, goddesses, and lesser divinities. The woman in this story was not raised in the faith of the Jews, but she probably did have confidence that human beings could call on divine help.

Of course there were enterprising types ready to take advantage. Do you know the story of the woman with the issue of blood? Mark says, "She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse" (5:26). Probably this desperate Gentile mother had likewise been to numerous healers, describing her daughter's illness and her hope for healing. Time and again, she was disappointed. And then she heard about Jesus.

That's how famous Jesus was. Everyone was talking about him—not only Jews. This woman was not a Jew, and this region was not Jewish. Some commentators even speculate that Jesus was staying in a Gentile home. After all, he had just recently dismissed the dietary laws separating Gentiles from Jews. We heard that in Craig's sermon two weeks ago? "Jesus declared all foods clean." The Jesus in that story certainly seemed intent on breaking down some barriers.

So it is *possible* that he slipped into a Gentile's home, and maybe *that's* why the text says he didn't want anyone to know he was there. But more likely it was a Jewish home, and in that case the homeowner was in the region's minority. Jesus might have wanted to keep quiet so he wouldn't attract more Jews and cause trouble for his friend.

Or how about this one: Jesus was afraid that if his presence became obvious, his friend's non-Jewish neighbors would come seeking healing, and Jesus wasn't there to heal non-Jewish people. After all, Jesus was a product of his culture, too.

What did Jesus understand about who he was and what he was called to do? Every gospel gives us a different picture. In John, for example, Jesus "knew all people and ... knew what was in everyone" (John 2:24-25). In Mark, though, Jesus still has something to learn, even about himself. His understanding develops over time. John's Jesus frequently gives tests; Mark's Jesus frequently takes them. Like the one he's about to take from the Syrophenician woman.

She approaches him so boldly. What gives her the courage? Love for her daughter? Certainly. Desperation, unquestionably. And also her unconquered belief that someone, someday, will hear her. She is predisposed to believe in divine power; *and* she believes someone will connect her to it. Someone will help. Someone will hear.

So she tells Jesus about her daughter, and begs him to cast out the demon. She starts a conversation—and Jesus tries to stop it. Worse, he attempts to exit the space of conversation, not just by saying no, but by insulting the woman. "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

There is no getting around it. Don't think commentators haven't tried. Some have concentrated on Jesus' use of a diminutive form in Greek: He doesn't say "dogs," he says "puppies." Who doesn't love puppies?¹ But it is difficult to deny that Jesus has answered hope with insult. It is hard even to catch our breath.

In the same way that all four gospels explore Jesus' self-understanding, all four gospels also consider how and when Jesus' ministry extended beyond the Jews. When did it become

¹ See Pheme Perkins' summary of commentary, *New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), VIII.610.

apparent that salvation was available to all? In Mark, that crucial revelation is about to occur right here, in Jesus' encounter with the Syrophenician woman. But for a terrible moment, it seems that the door to the kingdom of God is swinging shut, and the one closing it is Jesus.

But this bold woman has her foot in the door. She stays in the conversation, and she won't let Jesus leave it, either. And that is astonishing. Not only in its boldness, but in its hope. After an insult like that, she has no reason to believe that he will hear her. Or does she?

Jesus can't escape notice because his reputation precedes him. Who hasn't heard the stories? They are being told everywhere. She's heard that he has healed diseases and cast out demons. She's heard about the leper who said, "If you choose, you can make me clean," and she's heard that Jesus was moved to make that choice. She's heard about the man in the synagogue with a withered hand, and how Jesus was grieved because the Pharisees didn't want the man healed on the Sabbath. Surely she's heard about the woman with the issue of blood, bold as herself, who touched Jesus' cloak and was healed. She has heard not only that Jesus heals but that he can be moved, grieved, touched. She has heard that he offers radical abundance, feeding 5,000 with just five loaves of bread and two small fish. And she might have heard, too, that he questioned laws of separation, declaring all foods clean; that he can break down boundaries.

With these stories being told everywhere, how could Jesus escape her notice? She knows who he is. She recognizes him, all right: He is her best hope. His presence itself is what gives her courage to use her voice, and keep using it. So she stays in the conversation, and she answers him. "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." By using his own metaphor, she insists that he stay in the conversation, too. And for that, Jesus rewards her.

What does he say? “Your faith has made you well”? No. Jesus rewards her for what she says—for her very words. King James: “For this saying, go thy way.” New International Version: “For such a reply, you may go.” English Standard: “For this statement you may go your way. The demon has left your daughter.” He rewards her for staying in the conversation, and for giving him the word that refreshes his own exhausted spirit, reopens his eyes to the possibilities of divine power—possibilities that he was at first too reluctant, or too enculturated, or just too tired to see.

And after this encounter, everything changes—not just for the woman and her daughter, but for the whole world. Because while the woman goes home and finds her daughter healed, Jesus goes out and starts doing ministry to the Gentiles. He performs another healing, still in this non-Jewish region, and then feeds another 4,000 people—still in a non-Jewish region. And when the second feeding is over, Jesus reproves his disciples for doubting, ever, that there could be enough bread. All because one determined woman stayed in the conversation, and made Jesus stay there, too, until what could not escape notice was the radical abundance of God’s grace.

I wonder if that kind of conversation could happen today. There is certainly strong traffic in rejection and insult, but not so much in real discussion. It’s not easy to stay in the conversation. Our desire to be angry overwhelms our desire to be heard; or we think we can be heard more clearly on the Internet. It’s so easy to storm out of the room and back to the computer. Today, the Syrophenecian woman, instead of sticking with her point and moving Jesus’ heart, might just go on Facebook and tell everyone how angry she is. Everyone who agreed would give her a “like.” Everyone who didn’t would send an angry message. No hearts would be changed, and neither would the world.

But today, she might not come to Jesus in the first place. A person looking for hope today might not look to the church. Today, the woman might point to the church's poor record on dealing with wounds like racism and sexual abuse as evidence that the church cannot be trusted to hear her story. Or, as a product of today's culture, she might assume that humans are without divine help. Or she might not think about the church because it's just not relevant. Possibly the church, and even the presence of Jesus, simply escapes her notice.

If the presence of Jesus escapes notice today, it is no one's fault but our own. It is our fault for not telling the stories that once made his reputation precede him. It is our fault for not living his example. It is our fault for not staying in the conversation when we are challenged by new ideas or difficult personalities.

As long as there are people with stories to tell, we, the church, *must* demonstrate our willingness to stay in the conversation—even to the point of letting it change us. We *must* make it obvious that we will hear. Because when people stop believing someone will hear them, they stop talking. Sometimes they start shooting.

We must make the presence of Jesus obvious in the world, so obvious that he cannot escape notice. As long as the world can't help noticing Jesus is here, the world will know there is hope. The world will know that someone hears.

The presence of Christ gives people the courage to use their voices; to ask for what they need; even to refresh the perspective of other believers, and keep us all in the conversation. This is how people learn. This is how hearts are changed; and changing hearts changes the world.

Amen.