



# SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

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"Persistent Faith" - Hope Restored Sermon Series

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**G**ood Morning! We're continuing our sermon series through the Gospel According to Mark that we've entitled, "Hope Restored." And the text we're going to look at in Mark chapter 7 is one I don't think I have ever preached a sermon on. This passage is, what we call in academic, theological circles, "a doozy." To be honest, when I saw that I had been assigned to preach on this text and as I sat down to reread it, I think my hand ended up on my forehead. There could have been some head shaking as well.

There are moments when Jesus either does something, or in this case, says something, that just baffles me, at least at first. That is not surprising to me. Jesus, after all, is God in human flesh and I am not. His ways are not my ways but just because I don't get it at first should not encourage me to just skip over the difficult texts. Some of the best insights are buried in passages like this one.

I often have a feeling of wonder when I read what Jesus says and does but my initial reaction to what He says here to a desperate woman who comes seeking His help for her

daughter was, "Come on! Why do you do that?" and you know what, I think Jesus is perfectly fine with that reaction because it's honest, it's real. It's far better to be real with our responses to what we read in Scripture than to close the book, shake our head and walk away.

My first response to what Jesus says here was to be offended and to ask myself, "Why does He respond to her like this?" But I am growing in my understanding of the heart of Jesus. I am learning more about His character so there must be something I'm not seeing or understanding that will help me make sense of this uncomfortable encounter.

After studying this text and praying about it, my hand went from my forehead to being raised into the air in praise to God for how generous and merciful and all-embracing Jesus is. Hopefully, you'll have a similar experience as we think together about this passage and listen for what God wants to say to each of us this morning through this challenging text.

Okay, let's get started. Jesus has an encounter with a Gentile woman in a place that was

historically hostile to the people of Israel.



Tyre is in modern day Lebanon in a region formerly known as Phoenicia. It was the home of Jezebel, who in the days of Elijah, had tried to undermine the Northern Kingdom of Israel by introducing her pagan deities and practices to the Jews. The Old Testament prophets spoke against the wealth and terrorizing power of Tyre. And Josephus, the famous first century historian, referred to the inhabitants of Tyre as one of the Jews' "bitterest enemies."

The paganism that Tyre represented and practiced was some of the most extreme forms of paganism a Jew might encounter in Jesus' day. So, the Jews and the inhabitants of Tyre did not play well together and yet, Jesus comes here, from Galilee, and has this interaction, as prickly as it is, with a Gentile woman from this community.

**B**efore we take a look at this text, I've got one more thing to tell you. What I'm about to say is not going to be much help with the uncomfortable part of this passage but before we read the text, let's do a little Greek word study. I want to look at the meaning of one word Jesus and the woman use because I think it is going to help us begin to understand Jesus. Here is the prickly statement Jesus says to this desperate woman in response to her plea for help.

In Mark 7:27 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."* See, I told you, this one's a doozy.

The word for "dogs" that Jesus uses is NOT the word used to refer to the dogs that roamed the streets, eating garbage. That word in Greek is "kyon" which refers to street dogs like this one.



Or like these dogs, from Pixar's movie, "Up".



Those are "kyon". Jesus doesn't use that word for dog. He uses the diminutive form of the word,

which is "kynarion", which refers to household pets, puppies That were welcomed in the home. Like this dog



Or this little pup

**(SHOWED VIDEO OF PUPPY LEARNING TO BE AN AVALANCHE DOG).**

I love the little face plant Jake does in that video And I think Vail should comp me a day of skiing next winter for showing a 1000 people that little promo video. That seems super reasonable to me. Okay, That's not a lot of help but it's a start. I'm going to give us some additional assistance with these verses in a moment. So, if you are able, would you please stand for the reading of God's Word? Mark chapter 7 verse 24.

Mark 7:24 *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, <sup>25</sup> but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about Him, and she came and bowed down at His feet. <sup>26</sup> Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged Him to cast the demon out of her daughter. <sup>27</sup> (Jesus) 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."*



<sup>28</sup> *But she answered Him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."*  
<sup>29</sup> *Then He said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter."*  
<sup>30</sup> *So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.*

I think if Jesus had been writing these words, instead of speaking them, He might have put quotes around the word "dogs". He already uses the diminutive form of the word to soften it. It is true that Jews referred to the Gentiles sometimes as street dogs. That's what they called them but knowing what I know about Jesus and His heart for the world, I do not believe that He shared that view of Gentiles.

What happens in this passage should be seen as the application of what Jesus taught in the previous verses that we heard about last week.

Jesus makes it crystal clear in His interaction with the Jewish leaders in Mark 7:1-23 that foods or people should not be classified as clean and unclean. That was the point He was trying to make with the religious leaders in the previous passage that Chris Pan preached on last week.

**S**o, Jesus reinforces this conviction, and intensifies the controversy that is already brewing, by healing the daughter of the Syrophenician woman. What He ultimately does in this interaction with a person who is outside the covenant community of Israel, demonstrates to His disciples, to the Jewish leaders of His day and to us, that He has more than enough compassion and mercy for both the Jews and the Gentiles. The Kingdom of God is for all.

In verses 24-30 we go from the classroom and the theory outlined in verses 1-23 to the world. Jesus puts the theological arguments He made with the religious leaders into practice and it is shocking to the people who saw Him do it and to those who would hear about it later. The woman received God's love and grace as a Gentile. She does not convert to Judaism before the goodness of the Kingdom of God touches her life. This was very controversial, counter-cultural stuff in his day. Jesus Christ is the way into the Kingdom of God and that way is open to everybody who puts their trust in Him.

One commentator, in response to the verbal sparring that takes place between Jesus and the woman, describes her as a female Jacob. In the Old Testament, Jacob wrestled with God one night alongside the Jabbok River and Jacob prevailed. He wrestled all night with this man who jumped him the night before He was going to attempt a reunion with his brother Esau.

In Genesis 32 Jacob is in the fight of his life and that's saying a lot if you know his story. Who would have expected that God would jump someone in the middle of the night?

When we think about having a deeply, life-transforming encounter with God, most of us do not picture what happens in either the story of Jacob or the story of the Syrophenician woman. When we talk about bringing our requests to God in prayer we think about being at peace, maybe sitting quietly, getting centered. That is a very important aspect of our prayer life. I often do too much talking when I pray and not enough listening and waiting on God. I've had amazing times of prayer sitting peacefully at home or while overlooking the beauty of God's creation.

In Genesis 32, Jacob is on his way home for the first time in twenty years. Jacob's got a brother whose name is Esau. They were fraternal twins. The last time they saw each other, Esau threatened to kill Jacob, which is why Jacob ran away from home. Jacob had cheated his brother not once but twice and now Jacob is on his way home and Esau is coming to meet him with 400 men.

In the middle of the night, Jacob has a very intimate, up close encounter with God. But that encounter is not like what I experienced overlooking the sea between Northern Ireland and Scotland this summer.

**(SHOWED VIDEO FROM NORTHERN IRELAND).**

On the night before Jacob is supposed to meet his brother for the first time in two decades, when he's alone, filled with fear, wondering what's going to happen in the morning when he meets his brother, right in the middle of all that God jumps him and wrestles him to the ground. I love this about God - sort of. All of a sudden, right in the middle of the book of Genesis, were in the WWE Night of Champions but this wrestling match is for real. God wrestles with Jacob and they struggle with each other for hours!

I had a roommate in college who was a high school wrestler, who went on to coach wrestling for a while. When we were roommates in college, he would sometimes just jump me for no good reason and wrestle me to the ground. My friend, who is also now a Presbyterian pastor, could immobilize me in a matter of seconds. In a couple of minutes I'd be exhausted trying to fight him off. This wrestling match between God and Jacob went on all night long. Sometimes our wrestling matches with God can go on much longer that we had planned.

Jacob doesn't get centered in this encounter with God. God knocks him off balance, which is an experience you and I sometimes can benefit from. Jacob gets super clear about some very important things in his life in the middle of this wrestling match.

This is not the kind of life-changing encounter most of us expect to have with God.

**B**ut this wrestling match turns out to be the turning point in Jacob's life and this encounter with Jesus will change the lives of the Syrophenician woman and her daughter. By the time we get to the end of the story of Jacob, he is a different person, not a perfect person, free of all his character weaknesses, but something very important has changed in his life. It's all gotten very personal for Jacob along side the Jabbok River.

One of the things Jacob's story teaches us and this story in Mark does as well, is that it has to get personal for you and me too. Our faith has to become something so much more than a set of propositions to consider and maybe argue with other people about.

How personal has your relationship with God gotten for you? When we're talking about the God of the Bible we're talking about drawing near to a God who can be comforting, yes; healing and encouraging, yes. But He can also be unsettling and at times a little wild. Drawing near to God can take courage. Courage like we see in the Syrophenician woman.

Jacob finds out that God is a wrestler. One of the ways you know your faith has become truly personal is when you realize that God is bothering your life. When you start to consider the possibility that there just might be some things in your life that need to change, when you start to see that maybe there are some really significant things you need to start doing

and maybe there are some things you need to stop doing, you're in a wrestling match with God and that can be a really good but exhausting experience.

A couple of other things we discover from this text in Mark and the one in Genesis is that all this wrestling is for a purpose. Jesus has a purpose behind the way He interacts with the woman from Tyre and God had a purpose behind His wrestling match with Jacob. Neither were obvious. Both Jacob and the woman continued to wrestle with God and he blessed both of them. God wants to speak a word of blessing into our lives but sometimes we're only going to be able to hear and receive that word of blessing when we come to God in humility, open to what He wants to say and do in us.

Here we have a woman, a Gentile woman who has a child who is tormented by an unclean spirit. She's desperate to get her daughter the help she needs. People from Tyre and Sidon had already been to Israel and had seen what Jesus was capable of doing. They'd apparently come back to Tyre and spread the news about this worker of miracles.

I think Jesus is looking for respite from the growing anger and frustration He was facing from the Jewish leaders in Israel. So He comes all the way up to Tyre where He stays in the home of a Jew who lived there. He's looking for some down time and doesn't get it. Word spreads that He's there and a woman barges into this Jewish home, seeking

help for her daughter. She believes that Jesus has the power to heal her child. I love the passion, the persistence of a mother who is seeking the welfare of her child.

Martin Luther, the great Protestant reformer who also spent a lot of time wrestling with God, loved this story. He found in this passage of Scripture what he called "a great wonder and comfort." He observes that the woman asked for more than what she was due. She fully accepted the fact that in God's plan of salvation, the Jews took priority.

But she also trusted that it was possible for God's superabundance, His generosity to spill over and include her people and others like her. Luther writes, "She took Christ at his own words.

He then treated her not as a dog but as a child." Jesus found in her the kind of faith He had been looking for in his own disciples and in the people of Israel. She kept on asking, seeking, knocking and her persistence demonstrated that she had confidence in what Jesus could do. If you're in a wrestling match with God, could it be that God is calling you to persistence. Don't give up.

Finally, I think Jesus might have used the term "dogs", even in its diminutive form, to shock his disciples. Are we really going to shut this woman out of the Kingdom and do so by diminishing her humanity by referring to the Gentiles as "street dogs"?

**A**re we going to continue to look at those who are different as less than we are? I think Jesus is sending a resounding message in this interaction with this unnamed “outsider” and His clear answer is, “No!” We are not going to do that. The Kingdom of God is for everyone, male and female, Jew and Greek, rich and poor, for every race, ethnicity and nation.

It was unthinkable to many in Jesus’ day that God could be loving, compassionate and merciful to the Gentiles. They had grown up believing that the promises of God were just for them, forgetting that God had chosen them to be a blessing to the whole world. That was the plan from the beginning. They were blessed to be a blessing to others.

The fact that God chose them, gave them His Law, lived with them in the Tabernacle and in the Temple did not mean that God was only interested in their welfare. He blessed them so that they might show the world what God’s grace and mercy and love looks like. And He did that so the people of the world would experience the heart and character of God through them and come to know and entrust themselves to Him.

He chose the people of Israel so that they would be his agents of hope in the world, so that they, along with others outside the community of Israel, would have hope restored. God’s blessing wasn’t only for them and about them. It was for the world. But most of them failed to

understand that. They did not know God’s heart.

So here is Jesus, explaining that His ministry is first to make an appeal to the Jews. But what he knows is coming is that the kingdom of God is open to all the peoples of the world and He is going to raise up a church that understands that and will live that out. Do we understand this?

Do we have a growing and expansive heart of compassion for others, including those who are not a part of our group, our community, our tribe, our nation?

Many long-held, personal values are challenged as we study the Scriptures and hear the Word of God taught and preached. There is no area of life that is to remain untouched by Jesus. He wants to reorder our convictions, our priorities, our beliefs to come into line with his. And when we have our convictions reordered, will we trust Jesus and His word enough to do what He tells us to do; to be the agents of His grace and love in our world?

After studying this text and praying about it, my hand went from my forehead to being raised into the air in praise to God for how generous and merciful and all-embracing Jesus is.

My question is no longer, “What are you doing Jesus?” Now it is “What are you wanting to do in me, Jesus, and through me for others?” Lord, in your mercy, make us more like you.

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Note: Sunday sermon texts are also available at [fpchawaii.org](http://fpchawaii.org). The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. You may also request the audio version by visiting: [fpchkoolau@gmail.com](mailto:fpchkoolau@gmail.com)