

## Jesus Gets Schooled

May the words of my mouth, and the mediation of my heart, be acceptable to thee, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer, AMEN.

A colleague at work has a sign in her office, “Well-behaved women rarely change the world.”

And here we are, 2000 years later, talking about a powerless, marginalized and nameless woman, who told truth to power and now, two millennia later, she is whatever immorality is. We will all be dust and she will still survive in the Bible and Christian imagination as the Syrophenician woman.

Desperate mothers, and fathers, too, have a fury all their own. There are moments in the hospital where when I see their shattering desperation comes alive. I remember a mother who had survived the genocide in Cambodia when nearly 3 million people died. She was a child during the horror of the Pol Pot years, as was her husband. Decades later, she was told her teenage daughter would not survive her cancer.

I keep a list in my heart of families who could make me an atheist, because the unfairness and cruelty of some situations feels obscene.

In a family meeting with the doctors who told her the news she threw herself at their feet and bowed repeatedly through her hysteria and tears. “How much money do you need? Whatever you need to make her better, I will get it. Tell me how much money. I get it I get it for you if you make my daughter live.”

We sat in silence until she wore herself out; her fury spent. A doctor tried to explain. Money wasn’t the issue her disease was.

This is what I think of when I read about the Syrophenician woman. I have been witness to a desperation like hers. It’s awful and I appreciate its power to shake you to your core, and I suspect that’s what happened to Jesus.

Remember, too, the context of this story. Jesus’ close friend, John the Baptist, had been beheaded. Jesus fed the 5,000, walked on water, been besieged by crowds seeking healing, instructed the Pharisees, and finally, exhausted, went away to a house in Tyre, and, according to our gospel this morning, “did not want anyone to know he was there.”

Then that woman bursts into the room and is Jesus ever pissed. He lashes out with a disturbing cruelty. And then is forever changed.

“Sir,” she said, “even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”

The silence that followed still echoes through the millennium. “Silence is God’s first language,” wrote 16<sup>th</sup> Century mystic John of the Cross. In this silence we can hear Jesus change and it’s a silence that if we really listen, has the power to change us, too, from the inside out.

Jesus realizes that he’s been horrible. Exhausted and reactive, yes, but horrible, and so very human. As Debie Thomas writes in her weekly newsletter, “Journey with Jesus:”

The outcast, the other, wants a piece of this Good News Jesus is proclaiming and calls him up short. “Lord, where is my Good News? Where’s my place at the table? ... If you are who you say you are, how can you be content when *anyone* goes hungry in the vicinity of your table?”

Continues Thomas:

He allows her - the ethnic, religious, and gendered Other - to school him in his own gospel. To deconstruct his bias and entitlement. To break the barrier of his prejudice. To teach him compassion. The Jesus who never loses a verbal contest with anyone in Scripture sits back in amazement and concedes the argument to an audacious, female foreigner.

What’s more, he admits he was wrong in saying, “Because of your teaching, the demon has left your daughter.”

Miracle stories can be thieves who steal our attention and leave us awestruck: “How did *that* happen?” We are so dazzled we miss the miracle a passage like this story has to offer.

The Syrophenician woman proves that Jesus is more like us than we even imagined. He hits his limits, loses his temper, and can be racist, entitled, and exclusive.

Jesus is forever changed by this encounter. God apparently wasn’t finished with him. Why do we think he’s ever finished with us?

This passage is immediately followed by the deaf man a crowd brings to Jesus. Looking up to heaven, Jesus said, “Be opened” and the deaf man could hear.

But perhaps we are asked to be reminded how much more of Jesus has been opened to us. He could have said to the man ‘Listen” or “Go in peace”, but instead he said “Be opened.”

Because how much more can each and every one of us understand, feel, and give to ourselves, our families, and our communities if we allow ourselves to open to other voices, very unlike our own?

Can you “Be opened to the destabilizing wisdom of people who are nothing like you?” writes Debie Thomas adding:

Be opened to the voice of God speaking from places you consider unholy. Be opened to the widening of the table, be opened to Good News that stretches your capacity to love. Be opened.

Hope has had a very tough week this week. The catastrophe in Afghanistan, the destruction in Haiti, already vanished from the headlines, and there’s New Orleans, Louisiana, and the devastation right here in our homes and neighborhoods this week when the flood waters rose and the tornadoes touched down. Tornadoes used to make me think of “The Wizard of Oz,” not Flourtown. And more than 1,000 Americans are still dying every day from Covid.

I don’t know where the Good News is.

A house in a quiet place where no one knows where I am sounds about right.

Except none of us has that luxury.

A teenage patient once made a painting when she couldn’t sleep one night that made an acronym from HOPE: Hold On Pain Ends, and I think that for now, holding on gives me hope.

The genius Jesuit priest, Daniel Berrigan said, “Know where you stand and stand there.”

So I’ll stand with Jesus, hold on, and pray to be opened as he was.

Because God never gives up on us. He never stops trying to change us. Look at Jesus. Yeah, look at Jesus. God wasn’t finished with him yet. All Jesus had to do was “be opened.”

There were so many other ways God could have used to change Jesus.

But he sent a desperate mother, a badly-behaved woman, who made Jesus someone even he would not have recognized the day before.

She taught Jesus that just because she hadn’t been invited, didn’t mean she didn’t belong at the table.

In the silence that followed, he knew she was right.

It was Jesus’s born again moment and for that, thanks be to God. AMEN.