

A SYRO-PHOENICIAN WOMAN

(Mark 7:24-30)

This story is about the action of God in establishing peace and justice in the midst of the enmities that develop between human groups. Jesus' action in relation to the Syro-Phoenician woman makes it clear that the source of peace and reconciliation is an honest and just crossing of the boundaries that separate enemies. The story creates a new relationship between enemies. The way of the Messiah is to make peace between enemies. One way to learn the ways of peace is to learn the stories of God's actions for peace and justice. Telling the stories of God opens a new range of possibilities for Christian social action.

The Story

And from there he arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon.
And he entered a house and wanted no one to know.
Yet he could not be hid.

But immediately a woman, whose little daughter was possessed by an unclean spirit, heard of him, and came and fell down at his feet.
Now the woman was a Greek, a Syrophenician by birth.
And she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.

And he said to her, "Let the children first be fed.
For it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."
But she answered him, "Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

And he said to her, "For this saying you may go your way. The demon has left your daughter."
And she went home, and found the child lying in bed, and the demon gone.

Learning the Story

The four episodes of the story have a typical healing-story structure: setting, the woman and her request, direct discourse between Jesus and the woman, the pronouncement, and confirmation of the healing.

Verbal Threads

"The demon out of her daughter." This is the most important verbal thread in the story. The woman's request at the end of the second episode is that he "cast the demon out of her daughter" (vs. 26). The last two sentences of the final episode reiterate the theme but with a new verb, "left" (*ekselaluthen*); Jesus says, "the demon has left your daughter" (vs. 29) and (literal translation) "the woman goes home, finds her daughter in bed, and the demon had left" (vs. 30).

"The dogs." This phrase is the verbal yarn that weaves together Jesus' statement and the woman's response (vss. 27-28). The woman's statement picks up and reweaves Jesus' words in an artful way. A literal translation of the words is as follows:

Jesus – "Allow first to be fed the children [*tekna*]. For it is not right to take the bread of the children and throw it to the dogs" (vs. 27).

Woman – "Yes sir, and the dogs under the table eat from the crumbs of the kids [*paidion*]" (vs. 28).

We do not know the precise connotations of the two different words for children used here by Jesus and the woman. The woman's word (*paidion*) is connected in Mark with the story of the healing of Jairus's (a synagogue elder) daughter (5:21-23, 35-43), Jesus' discourse on service to children as service to him (9:36-37), and the story of Jesus blessing the children (10:13-16). As a result, her statement is positively related to prominent themes in Jesus' teaching and actions throughout Mark's narrative. The translation "kids" may catch some of the affection for children that the word implies.

Scenes

Scene 1. Wide pan shot of Jesus' trip to Tyre, Jesus entering a house secretly, and the rumor spreading among the people of the town.

Scene 2. Wide shot of the Syro-Phoenician woman falling at his feet and begging him to help her daughter.

Scene 3. Close-up of the discussion between Jesus and the woman about the dogs.

Scene 4. Close-up of Jesus' words and pan back to the woman going home and finding the daughter in bed and the demon gone.

Listening to the Story

Our goal is to hear the depth of the story's impact in its original context.

Tyre and Sidon were coastal cities in what is now Lebanon. The fact that they were primary targets of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon is indicative of their relationship to the community of Israel then as well as now. From the days of Jezebel to the present, these cities have been the enemies of Israel. Jesus' trip was then a trip into enemy territory. The only earlier mention of Tyre and Sidon in Mark is a description of the crowds who came to hear and be healed by Jesus (3:8). This probably indicates that the narrator presented this trip in a relatively objective rather than a negative or hostile manner.

The episode about the woman's action, however, was probably presented with an attitude of incredulosity and amazement. For a Syro-Phoenician woman to make this request, in the context of the relationships between Syrians and Israelites, was almost unprecedented. The only precedent in the tradition of Israel for such a request from an enemy is the story of Naaman, the general of the Syrian army, who traveled to Israel to ask Elisha to cure his leprosy (II Kings 5). Relationships between Israelites and Syrians in the intervening period since mid-ninth century B.C. had certainly not improved. The question raised by her action is, why would she do such a thing? What is the spirit of this plea? The possibilities are either arrogance or its exact opposite, an extreme humility. In the context of first-century politics, the general assumption of Jewish listeners would be that a Syro-Phoenician woman would only make such a request out of arrogance.

That assumption was based on recent memory. One of the most vivid narrative memories in the tradition of Israel in Jesus' period was the persecution of Jews by Antiochus Epiphanes and specifically, the report of his public trials recorded in II Maccabees 6 and 7. The most poignant story is the martyrdom of seven brothers and their mother, who were arrested and publicly tortured to death by Antiochus because they wouldn't eat pork (II Macc. 7). I would suggest that you read the story, perhaps even aloud, as a way of hearing the context of Mark's narrative in the first century.

It happened also that seven brothers and their mother were arrested and were being compelled by the king, under torture with whips and cords, to partake of unlawful swine's flesh. One of them, acting as their spokesman, said, "What do you intend to ask and learn from us? For we are ready to die rather than transgress the laws of our fathers."

The king fell into a rage, and gave orders that pans and caldrons be heated. These were heated immediately, and he commanded that the tongue of their spokesman be cut out and that they scalp him and cut off his hands and feet, while the rest of the brothers and the mother looked on. When he was utterly helpless, the king ordered them to take him to the fire, still breathing, and to fry him in a pan. The smoke from the pan spread widely, but the brothers and their mother encouraged one another to die nobly, saying, "The Lord God is watching over us and in truth has compassion on us, as Moses declared in his song which bore witness against the people to their faces, when he said, 'And he will have compassion on his servants.'"

After the first brother had died in this way, they brought forward the second for their sport. They tore off the skin of his head with the hair, and asked him, "Will you eat rather than have your body punished limb by limb?" He replied in the language of his fathers, and said to them, "No." Therefore he in turn underwent tortures as the first brother had done. And when he was at his last breath, he said, "You accursed wretch, you dismiss us from this present life, but the King of the universe will raise us up to an everlasting renewal of life, because we have died for his laws."

After him, the third was the victim of their sport. When it was demanded he quickly put out his tongue and courageously stretched forth his hands, and said nobly, "I got these from Heaven, and because of his laws I disdain them, and from him I hope to get them back again." As a result, the king himself and those with him were astonished at the young man's spirit, for he regarded his sufferings as nothing.

When he too had died, they maltreated and tortured the fourth in the same way. And when he was near death, he said, "One cannot but choose to die at the hands of men and to cherish the hope that God gives of being raised again by him. But for you there will be no resurrection to life!"

Next they brought forward the fifth and maltreated him. But he looked at the king, and said, "Because you have authority among men, mortal though you are, you do what you please. But do not think that God has forsaken our people. Keep on, and see how his mighty power will torture you and your descendants!"

After him they brought forward the sixth. And when he was about to die, he said, "Do not deceive yourself in vain. For we are suffering these things on our own account, because of our sins against our own God. Therefore astounding things have happened. But do not think that you will go unpunished for having tried to fight against God!"

The mother was especially admirable and worthy of honorable memory. Though she saw her seven sons perish within a single day, she bore it with good courage because of her hope in the Lord. She encouraged each of them in the language of their fathers. Filled with a noble spirit, she fired her woman's reasoning with a man's courage, and said to them, "I do not know how you came into being in my womb. It was not I who gave you life and breath, nor I who set in order the elements within each of you. Therefore the Creator of the world, who shaped the beginning of man and devised the origin of all things, will in his mercy give life and breath back to you again, since you now forget yourselves for the sake of his laws."

Antiochus felt that he was being treated with contempt, and he was suspicious of her reproachful tone. The youngest brother being still alive, Antiochus not only appealed to him in words, but promised with oaths that he would make him rich and enviable if he would turn from the ways of his fathers, and that he would take him for his friend and entrust him with public affairs. Since the young man would not listen to him at all, the king called the mother to him and urged her to advise the youth to save himself. After much urging on his part she undertook to persuade her son. But, leaning close to him, she spoke in their native tongue as follows, deriding the cruel tyrant: "My son, have pity on me. I carried you nine months in my womb, and nursed you for three years, and have reared you and brought you up to this point in your life, and have taken care of you. I beseech you, my child, to look at the heaven and the earth and see everything that is in them, and recognize that God did not make them out of things that existed. Thus also mankind comes into being. Do not fear this butcher,

but prove worthy of your brothers. Accept death, so that in God's mercy I may get you back again with your brothers."

While she was still speaking, the young man said, "What are you waiting for? I will not obey the king's command, but I obey the command of the law that was given to our fathers through Moses. But you, who have contrived all sorts of evil against the Hebrews, will certainly not escape the hands of God. For we are suffering because of our own sins. And if our living Lord is angry for a little while, to rebuke and discipline us, he will again be reconciled with his own servants. But you, unholy wretch, you most defiled of all men, do not be elated in vain and puffed up by uncertain hopes, when you raise your hand against the children of heaven. You have not yet escaped the judgment of the almighty, all-seeing God. For our brothers after enduring a brief suffering have drunk of everflowing life under God's covenant; but you, by the judgment of God, will receive just punishment for your arrogance. I, like my brothers, give up body and life for the laws of our fathers, appealing to God to show mercy soon to our nation and by afflictions and plagues to make you confess that he alone is God, and through me and my brothers to bring to an end the wrath of the Almighty which has justly fallen on our whole nation."

The king fell into a rage, and handled him worse than the others, being exasperated at his scorn. So he died in his integrity, putting his whole trust in the Lord. Last of all, the mother died, after her sons.

Let this be enough, then, about the eating of sacrifices and the extreme tortures. (RSV Apocrypha)

This event probably took place in approximately 169 B.C. The stories of II Maccabees 6 and 7 were early Jewish martyr stories. The stories themselves were retold frequently, as is reflected in IV Maccabees, in which the principal subject is a more elaborate retelling of the story of the mother and her seven boys. The memories were, therefore, fresh and current for Mark and his listeners.

When seen against the background of this Jewish mother's intercessions for her seven sons, this Gentile woman's request on behalf of her daughter is shocking. The evidence that Mark reported the woman's request as a potential scandal is the position of his explanation of the woman's identity ("Now the woman was a Greek"-vs. 26). This narrative comment follows his description that the woman came in and fell at Jesus' feet. The function of these comments to the audience is to explain something surprising or puzzling in the previous statement. The fact that a woman whose daughter had an unclean spirit came and fell at Jesus' feet is no surprise. Men and women have been doing that throughout the story. The most graphic instance is the synagogue elder, Jairus, who fell at Jesus' feet and asked Jesus to heal his daughter (5:22). The comment, therefore, explained why the narrator reported her action with incredulousness and disbelief. The climax of the episode is then that she, a Gentile, asked him, a Jew, to cast the demon out of her daughter. In the context of the relationship between their nations, such a request was incredible.

The narrative comment is one indication that the telling of this story was shaped by Jewish norms. Another is the issue of the cleanliness laws. In Mark, this story follows Jesus' dispute with the Pharisees about the cleanliness laws in regard to food (7:1-23). Jesus' reinterpretation of the cleanliness laws is that what makes persons unclean is not the food they eat or whether they have washed their hands. What makes persons unclean is what comes out of their hearts. This reinterpretation of the cleanliness laws is of particular importance in relation to Gentiles like this woman. The system of food laws was one of the social structures that separated Jews from Gentiles. As is reflected in the story of Antiochus Epiphanes, the eating of pork was a battle line between Jews and Gentiles. Jews did not eat with Gentiles because they would be made unclean by the food. To attack the cleanliness laws was to attack the social structures that kept Israelites separated from their Gentile enemies. In this story, Jesus tests the spirit of this Gentile woman. He determines what is in her heart.

But the manner of Jesus' test is anything but gentle. The storytelling issue is how Jesus' words about the bread and the dogs were spoken. And the evidence is clear that Jesus'

words were confrontational and insulting. The images associated with throwing bread to the dogs are those of the garbage dump and the arena where people were thrown to the dogs. The phrases of Psalm 22 are indicative:

Many bulls surround me,
 strong bulls of Bashan surround me;
 Roaring lions tearing their prey
 open their mouths wide against me

 Dogs have surrounded me;
 a band of evil men encircled me,

 Deliver my life from the sword,
 my precious life from the power of the dogs.
 Rescue me from the mouth of the lions,
 save me from the horns of the wild oxen.

(vss. 12-13, 16, 20-21 NIV)

Packs of wild dogs were vicious predators in the ancient world, and, as is indicated by the associations in Psalm 22, they were generally feared and hated.

At the heart of the issue between Jesus and the woman is whether she will accept the insult of being called a dog. How the story was heard depends on the justice of Jesus' insult. In the context of what Syrians had done to Jews, the term was both just and appropriate. And, in the context of the story, the narrator assumes that the listeners will share this judgment.

Surprisingly, the woman accepts Jesus' description of her as a dog. It is an incredible response in the context of the social and political relationships of Jesus' day. But she also reinterprets Jesus' metaphor and appeals to a growing pattern of domestication of dogs as house pets. This redefinition of herself as a house pet is the linguistic dimension of her appeal for a new relationship to the blessings of the kingdom of God.

Her statement reveals what is in her heart. She has set aside all prideful assumptions of superiority and has made herself vulnerable for the sake of her daughter. Her words make clear that her spirit is a spirit of extraordinary humility, the exact opposite of arrogance. She too has crossed the boundaries between enemies. She has shown courage and a perseverant faith. Her action is like that of the woman with a flow of blood (Mark 5:25-34) who risked further social ostracism and the possibility of Jesus' hostility out of a determined faith. This story's greatest surprise is that such faith would be found in a Gentile.

The pause that separates her appeal from Jesus' concluding response is the story's answer to the question of whether Jesus knew what he was going to do beforehand. In the story, the pause is the time when the suspense rises, Jesus ponders and perhaps quietly smiles, and then speaks. No one could have foreseen the woman's response to his insult. Likewise, no one in the telling of the story can know how Jesus will respond. The silence even implies the possibility that the woman's response taught Jesus something about Gentiles. The norm of judgment that provides the context for Jesus' evaluation of her statement is his own redefinition of cleanliness. And what comes out of the 'woman's heart is clean.

The appeal of the story is to respond to Jesus' action as a sign of the kingdom of God rather than as collusion with the enemy. The help that is given to the woman is in response to her acceptance of Jesus' testing. His extension of the gifts of peace is based, therefore, on the establishment of justice in their communal relationship. Just as Mark invites the listeners to share the joy of Jairus and his wife when they saw their daughter get up and walk around the

room, so also this story invites the listeners to share the joy implicit in this Gentile woman's discovery of her daughter in bed and the demon *gone*!

Connections

The primary connection between this story and our experience is relationships with enemies. Who is the enemy? The enemy is a role, a pattern of relationship, into which many persons are cast. A parent, a child, or a spouse can become an enemy, as can a fellow worker, a boss, or a teacher/professor. But we primarily define our enemies in relation to other groups; another nation, religion, race, or ethnic group. Many human groups are in part defined by having a common enemy. And those enemies may change with time. Thus, in American history the enemies of longest standing have been England and then Germany, both of whom are now among the nation's closest allies. The Soviet Union and "communism" have taken their place as the national enemies. In the story of virtually every person and group, the enemies can be identified.

In order to connect with this story, therefore, the first question is, who are your enemies? I would suggest that you make an enemies list. And, as you make the list, remember those specific events of conflict and, if they are present, of reconciliation with those persons or groups. A recommendation is that you not only list those persons or groups whom you feel to be your enemies but also those who are the enemies of the groups with whom you are identified simply because of who you are. Thus, as a white, male, middle-class, liberal Protestant, Christian American, there are groups who regard me and the groups with which I am identified as enemies. And whether or not I feel enmity toward those groups, the fact is that in some sense they are my enemies.

One way of understanding enmity is in relation to boundaries. Persons and groups that are alienated from each other build up boundaries against their enemies. These boundaries take many different forms: national boundaries, turf lines, patterns of social life, and eating habits. A next step in exploring the connections with this story is to identify the boundaries that operate in your personal and social context that keep you separated from your enemies.

For example, in the United States, the structures for the separation or segregation of black and white Americans are extremely complex. In the aftermath of the civil rights movement, the separation of racial groups at public facilities such as buses, restaurants, restrooms, and swimming pools has been largely eliminated. Efforts have been made to eliminate the separations in schools, housing, and work. But I recognize that there are many structures in every aspect of my life that tend to separate me as a white man from persons who are black.

The enemies list is a resource for connecting with the dynamics of this story. When have you had an explicit confrontation with an enemy that ended in some kind of reconciliation or giving between you? How did you cope with the fact of your enmity with each other? The suggestion would be that you remember that story and tell it to yourself or to someone else. The emotions and dynamics of that encounter may be a resource for helping you to find a way of presenting this story of Jesus and the Syro-Phoenician woman.

Another way of connecting with the story that has proven to be helpful for some people has been a kind of story theater. It is a form of mutual storytelling in which two people tell the story to each other as persons within the story. In this story, one person would tell Jesus' parts of the story and the other the woman's parts:

The setting (episode i) – Jesus, trying to hide

The woman (episode 2) – woman, falling at Jesus' feet

Jesus' words (episode 3, sentences 1, 2) – Jesus

The woman's response (episode 3, sentence 3) – the woman

Jesus' blessing and words of healing (episode 4, sentences 1,2) – Jesus

The confirmation of the healing (episode 4, sentence 3) – the woman

In this exploration, as the story is told, each person acts out the relationship in order to discover the feelings and dynamics of the encounter. And, after doing it one way, the roles are exchanged and each person tells the other part of the story. Talking about the feelings that are generated by telling the story is often helpful. How does it feel to be the woman? Jesus? Finally, the whole story is told by each person so that the integrity of the story is preserved.

The connection that helps me understand this story happened during my first year in New York. For my field work at Union, I was hired as organist and choirmaster at Chambers Memorial Baptist Church in East Harlem, one of New York's ghetto communities. Chambers was a small American Baptist urban mission congregation. Not only had I never been in New York before, I had never been in a black community before.

It was the fall of 1962, the height of the civil rights movement. As I rode back across 125th Street on Sunday afternoons, I remember seeing large gatherings around Malcolm X, who was reputed to be preaching hatred of whites. I was often the only white man on the bus. Although no one was ever directly hostile to me, I felt like I was an enemy. And the more I learned about the ongoing effects of white racism, the more appropriate it became.

The choir was a small group of men and women who loved to sing. I was very nervous and unsure of myself. I now know how kind they were to me. But things weren't going very well. After church one autumn Sunday, Thelma Cockerham invited me to come to dinner that Wednesday night at her house next door to the church. I will never know what happened. I had not yet learned to write things down. And, with the combination of Union and Chambers, I was in more or less total cultural shock. But, for whatever reason, the next Sunday Thelma approached me with fire in her eyes: "Where were you on Wednesday night?" Only then did I remember. I had forgotten! To say "I forgot" had been a rather familiar excuse for me in high school. But, in this context, it was totally inappropriate. There was nothing to say except: "I am sorry. Forgive me." She said: "I fixed you a turkey dinner with all the trimmings. And you couldn't even remember." As my fellow field work students pointed out to me, this was not only unforgivable, it was also stupid, because Thelma was a great cook and her turkey dinners were legendary.

Thelma never forgot, nor did I. There was no cheap grace. It was a primal consciousness-raising experience for me about myself as a white man. Nervousness or fear was absolutely irrelevant. The only thing that counted was faithfulness and remembering. But the incredible fact was that during that year I found myself loved by the people of that church, and particularly by Thelma. Experiencing this kind of love, tough love which cuts across the boundaries that separate people, convinced me that I wanted to become an ordained minister. That is the kind of love Jesus shared with the Syro-Phoenician woman and her daughter.

Telling the Story

If one were to make a list of Jesus' enemies in the first century – sinners, various unclean persons, tax collectors, Gentiles, scribes, Pharisees – it would be striking how many of the stories of his ministry involve encounters in which Jesus took the initiative to cross the

boundaries that separated him from his enemies. The invitation of the story tradition is then to tell and hear these stories in relation to the boundaries that separate us from our enemies. The stories reveal the character of God who loves God's enemies. And God steadily works to bring about reconciliation with those who are separated from God and between persons and groups who are separated from each other. When heard in relation to our enmities, the story may shed light on possible ways in which God is at work to bring about reconciliation and peace.

In a group, a helpful way to tell and hear the story is then to share a present experience of enmity and alienation. It is good to share in relation to both personal and communal enemies. One way of discovering those boundaries is to ask, who are my deepest enemies now? Who is the person or group from which I [we] are most profoundly alienated? And if my friend has shared this with me, I will tell the story of Jesus and the Syro-Phoenician woman to my friend to see what the story might reveal. And after sharing what, if anything, the story meant as we heard it, we will switch. I will describe my present experience of enmity, and my friend will tell me the story. It is also possible for a group to identify their enemies and for one person to tell the story to the group. In some form, however, it is helpful for each person to have the opportunity to talk about what the story meant to them as they heard it.

I remember my first experience of hearing this story for myself. It was during a series on storytelling and peacemaking at a small church outside Dayton. We learned the story and explored its meaning in its original context. When the time came to listen to and tell the story in relation to our present experience, my partner was an older woman. I shared with her that my deepest concern was the enmity between the peoples of the Soviet Union and the United States. When she told me the story, it was immediately clear what needed to be done. We, as the Network of Biblical Storytellers, needed to organize a storytelling trip to the Soviet Union and try to establish an ongoing storytelling network with families, churches, and storytelling groups there.

As a direct result of that storytelling experience, a storytelling trip is presently being organized to coincide with the millennial anniversary of the establishment of Christianity in Russia, in the summer of 1988. Our hope is to tell stories – biblical, American folk tales, and personal stories about peace – and to invite persons there to share stories with us. Our hope is that this will be the first step in establishing a new pattern of relationships between persons in our two countries.

Storytelling and Peacemaking

The historian Karl Popper has made an interesting observation about the shaping of history. He said, "The making of history has been shaped from the top down with one exception, Jesus of Nazareth and his followers who made history from the bottom up." To whatever degree this is true, a primary factor in the impact of Jesus' movement has been the storytelling of his followers. In the first centuries of the church, Jewish Christians aggressively told the stories of Jesus to those from whom they were separated: Romans, Greeks, slaves, the rich, and soldiers. Their mission of telling the stories of good news was a foundation stone for the new patterns of relationship that were established in the church and in Roman society.

The simple suggestion that emerges from this realization is that telling the stories of God's peace may have a significant role to play in peacemaking now. To listen to and learn the stories of our enemies and make them our own is one step. To listen for ways in which to

tell the stories of the actions of God in relation to our enemies' alienation from us is another. And ways may emerge that will enable our enemies to tell us the stories of the Gospels in the context of their experience. Approaching the gospel as storytelling has been and may again be a principal resource for making history from the bottom up.