

**Sermon “Difficult Words”
Sunday September 9th, 2018**

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Do you ever find yourself in impossible situations? Sometimes we spread our time too thin and we have no idea how we will accomplish everything we need to get done. Sometimes, we find ourselves facing a difficult situation with family and friends and there is no easy way to resolve the problem. Whether it is through our health, work or, daily life we have likely all found ourselves facing the impossible on more than one occasion. I was visiting my friend when I was home this summer and there was a cute example of this very problem. She has a three-year-old daughter and is currently expecting her second. Her daughter pointed out that she had an impossible situation she did not know how to resolve and was hoping her mother might shed some light on what to do. Little Hannah has a doll named tiger baby because she wears a tiger costume. One afternoon Hannah came and said, "If I hold tiger baby in one arm, and the new baby in the other, I am not going to have any other arms, what am I going to do?" It truly was dilemma and she was quite perturbed. While they eventually hammered out what Hannah felt was an acceptable course of action not everything we face in life can be resolved so quickly. We find ourselves in that position this morning as we face a difficult passage of scripture in the book of Mark.

The encounter between Jesus and the Syrophenician women is one of the most challenging passages in the gospels because it has a response that we do not anticipate. Throughout the book of Mark Jesus has been healing people, casting out demons, and challenging the authorities on their interpretation of Jewish law. For those who were sick or asked him for help he does not turn them away, rather he has compassion on them. Then suddenly for reasons that are not obvious to us (the modern reader) a woman comes to him, bows down and asks for help and he rebuffs her request. It does not make sense, the answer sounds harsh in our ears and in our hearts, and we wonder what is

at work here. Now I must warn you, I read five different commentaries and not only did some of them have different opinions some of them were also in direct opposition to each other! Which put me in what felt like an impossible situation but, just because something is difficult does not mean we should not wrestle with it. So, this morning I thought we would take a few moments to look at some of the possible interpretations of this passage and why it is important.

Before we look at the arguments it is important to understand the context. The city of Tyre was pagan. Its lands stretched toward an area not far from the Sea of Galilee and while it was Gentile territory there were also many Jews who lived in the area. The passage today indicates that Jesus went to a house there and did not want anyone to know he was in the area. Jesus has not likely come here to preach but rather to have a few moments of quiet away from the crowds. In that particular area there is also a political imbalance between the wealthy Gentiles of Tyre and the Jewish peasants of the region. The animosity between the Jews and the Gentiles is well documented and known throughout the Bible. Jesus aware of all these things still chooses to go into the area instead of avoiding it completely.

While sitting in a house trying to get some rest from the relentless crowds he is interrupted by a potentially wealthy Gentile woman. It is here we come up against one of the most difficult lines in the gospels. She bows down at his feet and begs him to heal her daughter. While we expect healing in response to her request Jesus instead says, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Scholars have been unable to reach a consensus on what this could possibly mean. Theologian N.T Wright says that it is clear from the passage and context that this exchange should be thought of as banter between two people. Jesus recognizes the woman's strength and challenges her not in a harsh way but to draw out her thoughts which he receives in full measure. Others argue that this saying would not have been insulting in the original setting because

Jesus was using a familiar proverb, which would be like our "charity begins at home." A third writer said bluntly that while some have tried to soften the meaning over the years that the word is exactly as harsh as it sounds. The word is "dog" and dog is what he means. One last view put forward by the books I consulted suggested this response had something to do with the woman's wealth and to not presume to get what she wants simply because of economic privilege. As you can see there is very little consensus on the translation of this line!

Oftentimes in biblical scholarship and theology we may find there is not one clear answer. We may even find that how we understand a verse today may be different ten years from now. We look at context, we look at what we know to be true about Jesus as the scriptures reveal him to us, and we draw our conclusions as best we can. I often found in university one of the most valuable gifts professors gave me was the chance to draw my own conclusions. Today in this passage I would encourage you to do that. What do you think Jesus answered the way he did? Why do you think that? And most importantly how does it inform your understanding and experience of God?

For me personally I believe Jesus saw something in this woman that he wanted to draw out. I do not believe he would have let her go without healing her daughter simply because there is no precedent in the gospel accounts for it. We know he was not worried about the laws around purity because he travels to areas that were considered unclean for example, when he healed the Gerasene demoniac. We know he was not averse to healing Gentiles because he has already healed at least one if not more. The danger for Jesus who had a very specific mission to spread the gospel to both the Jews and later Gentiles was that people simply come to see him as a healer and lose sight of the power of God who makes healing possible. The mission is about more than Jesus, it is about more than healing, it is about the gospel message. To simply be reduced to someone who heals illness would be to lose the most important and vital parts of Jesus' mission. What do you think?

So, what is the point of all of this and why does it matter? While we may wrestle with the meaning behind Jesus' words there are some things this passage makes absolutely clear. The first is that faith in God has no boundaries. Jews, Gentiles and all people are welcome no matter their lineage or citizenship. The second is that most often it is people outside of the disciples that recognize Jesus for who he is. Not even his hometown had the eyes to see or the ears to hear. The third thing is that Jesus' mission was never limited to just one nation but rather was to proclaim God's unlimited power of redemption to all. It was interesting hearing the Syrophenician woman respond to Jesus. She reminded me a little of the persistent widow in Luke who stands her ground in the face of a difficult judge. She reminds us to be bold in our prayers and petitions, and to have courage. She has faith that Jesus can do the impossible and even when he questions her she does not waver. It is hard sometimes to keep that firm resolve but looking to her we see her boldness and courage.

More than anything both healing accounts that we read this morning are about the love of God changing lives in a way that people can't be quiet about. "They give voice to God's power and presence among them. The characters in both stories embolden us to share whatever glimpse of God's mercy, love and truth we have witnessed. Their stories and words remind us to focus our attention on God and to keep pointing toward the reign of God proclaimed by Jesus Christ." Throughout his ministry Jesus needed to stay focused on the mission, we strive to do the same as both individuals and as a church. May we continue to keep pointing people toward God who changes our lives and our world.