

A Change of Heart Can Be a God Thing  
Rev. Dr. Patricia L. Hunter  
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Mark 7:24-30

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, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He 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." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

I want to speak this morning from the theme: When a Change of Heart Is a God Thing

By this time in Jesus' ministry, he had touched the lives of many people--by healing them, feeding them, and by his teachings. As a result, Jesus' reputation preceded him where ever he went. Word was out that Jesus had run-ins with the religious authorities for not adhering to religious codes and rituals. Word was out that he calmed a raging storm. Word was out that he cast out demons, told good stories and parables, and fed over 5,000 men, women, and children. Because of Jesus' notoriety, crowds frequently surrounded him.

Because Jesus was fully human--just like we are, he got tired--just like we do. The gospels tell us that Jesus was tired and was found sleeping in a boat when a storm came up. Periodically, Jesus needed to get away. When he did, he retreated to the wilderness, he went up mountains, and crossed seas. And here in this text, Jesus went away to the region of Tyre, Gentile territory--a place where he hoped no one would recognize him.

We don't know whether Jesus was an introvert or an extrovert, but many pastors and religious leaders are introverts. If that was the case with Jesus, being around all those people all the time had worn him out! Those of us who are introverts can feel Jesus' pain of having to be present to so many people day in and day out. We know what it feels like to just want one day to be totally alone with our thoughts.

And even if Jesus was an extrovert, eventually party animals get tired and need a little bit of down time. Here in the gospel of Mark was one of those times for Jesus. Jesus didn't come to Tyre to preach, but to get a bit of R & R. Jesus hoped, that just for a little while, no one would recognize him and he could have a bit of peace and quiet.

Yet, as soon as he gets in the house (knock, knock, knock) a Syrophenician woman comes asking for help. In most of the gospel stories, when a person comes to Jesus in need, he is gracious, accommodating, satisfies the need, and applauds them for their faith. But here... not so much.

One of the things I like about Mark's gospel is that he is not interested in making every thing neat, tidy, and pretty. Mark was the first gospel written and he just wrote stories about Jesus--the good, the bad and the ugly.

Now, all of us have an off day at some point. We say things we ought not say and as soon as the words are out of our mouths we regret it. But, we can't take them back. Someone here may have already said something to your spouse this morning that you regret. I'm sure you will take care of that as soon as service is over.

Those of us on social media, see things posted everyday and we wonder what were others' thinking when they put those words out there. When we are tired, or sick, or even when we are grieving, our filters on knowing what to say and what not to say are diminished.

Now, this mother took a huge risk, by going to Jesus seeking help for her daughter. But never underestimate the love and tenacity of a mother (or a father) with a sick child. This woman had at least three strikes against her before knocking on the door and asking for help. First she was female. Tradition prohibited women from approaching and talking with men not in their families. Second, this woman was Syrophenician, which meant she was probably of darker skin, and certainly ethnically different from Jesus. There was no obligation to interact with her and people would whisper behind Jesus' back if he did engage her. And third, she did not share his faith. So this woman showed incredible courage in overcoming social, cultural, and religious obstacles just to approach Jesus.

Yet, until we are tested, we never know the depth of strength and courage we really have. So mustering every ounce of resolve, dignity, and hope she had, this unnamed mother approached the house and asked for Jesus. She explained her daughter's situation and begged--pleaded--over and over for Jesus to heal her daughter.

To her impassioned plea, Jesus responded, "Let the children be fed first. It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs". No one disputes that Jesus' first priority was to reach out to those of his own faith tradition. But, his response to this hurting mother with a sick child was harsh. It is not right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs. We cannot spiritualize Jesus' response as a metaphor and make it pretty. To refer to anyone or anyone's people as dogs is rough language, even if they are called little dogs or puppies. Many scholars say in that era to call someone a dog was a racial slur.

While 21st century Christians may be too refined to call others dogs or puppies, our language and actions toward others is at times also harsh and mean-spirited. I have been to many a church meeting where those who say they love the Lord, spewed words of hate and venom, and called those they despised everything but a child of God.

Parents at times will say mean things to their children particularly when the children are testing them or going through that awkward adolescent stage. Spouses will say mean things out of frustration, or fear, or when one is trying to control the other. In-laws at times will say harsh things to their sons and daughter-in-laws. It is sad that we take out our fear and frustration on those we love.

Harsh rhetoric is not reserved for family or church life. It is also heard in public discourse. The presidential election is 14 months out and already the tone of debate about foreigners and undocumented immigrants is appalling. Putting up a gigantic wall across the border between Mexico and the United States and deporting millions of people and their children is harsh rhetoric. That is no way to treat the foreigners in our midst. The writer of Hebrew said, (Hebrews 13:2) Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

Jesus said, let the children eat first. It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs. A weaker parent may have turned away ashamed, and demoralized. But this mother, had a come back. Even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs. Check and checkmate! Her wit and tenacity got Jesus' attention and he healed her daughter--not because faith, but because of her character. She was insistent, she had no other options, and she wouldn't take no for an answer.

You know a made up mind is not always made up. People *can* change and God is in the heart changing business. An old english proverb says, it is a long road that has no turn. If Jesus can have a change of heart, certainly we can as well.

God can change hearts of stone into hearts of flesh. It really is OK to change our minds, particularly when former beliefs are harmful, abusive, oppressive, out dated, or no longer make sense. Kim Davis of Kentucky can change her mind and resign or issue marriage licenses to whomever wants one. It is OK to change our minds and our hearts to be more inclusive than exclusive. It is OK to change our hearts and show more love than disdain. It is OK to change and be more forgiving than legalistic. It is OK to embrace family and friends we have been estranged from--- particularly when we can't remember what the original argument was about.

Jesus changed his mind and healed the woman's daughter. I'm pretty sure this is the only story about Jesus in the scriptures where he changed his mind. Jesus was under no obligation to change his mind, but he chose to cross social, cultural, and religious boundaries in order to do the right thing.

My sisters and brothers, as we move through the coming week, let us be mindful of our words and the harm and soul damage we can inflict on others. Make a decision to use your words to lift up and encourage.

If you know right now that you hurt someone by word, action, or deed, God will give you courage and wisdom to go fix it. We can change our hearts and offer hope, healing, forgiveness and love, to all those we meet along life's journey. And don't give up on others who may have said hurtful things to you. God is not through with any of us. And yes, a change of heart can be a God thing.