

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Place an open bible and lighted candle at the center of your group.

LEADER: May we speak the truth of our experience.

ALL: *May we open our ears to others' stories and views.*

LEADER: What would we do for our daughters?

ALL: *What wouldn't we do?*

LEADER: May we open our hearts to meet the people we stereotype out of ignorance.

ALL: *May our care like yours, loving God, break boundaries and free our children for harmony with people different from themselves.*

SUNDAY

by SUNDAY



“It’s not fair to throw the children’s bread to the dogs.” A short saying like this is perfect for a tweet today. It’s a short, easy-to-quote putdown. It’s like saying, “Don’t cast your pearls among swine.” In Jesus’ mouth the putdown is a shock. In effect, he labels the woman to whom he is speaking a dog. Apparently, Jesus’ early followers fought cultural wars just as we do today.

A child and her future are at stake in this gospel. A mother seeks out Jesus to free her daughter of a demon. Scholars can’t be sure what the people of Jesus’ time regarded as an unholy spirit. People

with low blood sugar wake up crabby. Diabetics make no sense when their sugar gets out of regulation. A mental illness traps people in their own worlds. Some conditions cause involuntary motions.

The demon proves less a problem than the mother’s ethnicity. She is not one of us; she is one of them. She is a Gentile, a Canaanite woman, and to many Jews in Jesus’ time and afterwards a dog.

Dog in this story is a belittling term for an outsider, a label that expresses prejudice against nonJews. Uncharacteristically Jesus, who helps everyone that comes to him, refuses to help this mother, refuses to bring God’s liberating love beyond

his own people.

Today some owners keep their dogs in the yard by laying charged wires around the perimeter underground. A passerby sees no fence but the dog feels a shock if it runs beyond the invisible barrier.

Similarly invisible but charged boundaries often divide tribes, races, and political parties. The differences between Jews and Gentiles in Jesus’ time become shockingly visible in Sunday’s gospel as borders and walls have in our political polarization.

● **What boundaries or prejudices have you encountered and broken down?**

GOSPEL

Jesus praises a woman of faith.

NARRATOR: Jesus went to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting.

WOMAN: Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.

NARRATOR: Jesus did not answer her at all. His disciples came and urged him, saying—

DISCIPLES: Send her away, for she keeps shouting at us.

JESUS: I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

NARRATOR: The woman came and knelt before Jesus.

WOMAN: Lord, help me.

JESUS: It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.

WOMAN: Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.

JESUS: Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.

NARRATOR: Her daughter was healed instantly.

Matthew 15.21-28

A speaker of truth changes Jesus' mind.

NARRATOR: Jesus set out and went 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. A woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him. She came and bowed down at his feet. The woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.

JESUS: Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.

NARRATOR: But she said—

WOMAN: Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.

JESUS: For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.

NARRATOR: So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Mark 7.24-30



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A mother calls us to faith.

In the revised three-cycle lectionary for which Vatican II called, the Church reads the story of the Canaanite or Syrophenician woman from Matthew rather than Mark. Neither version identifies the woman by name; both versions characterize the woman as a Gentile and a mother. In Matthew's conclusion to the

story, Jesus praises this pagan mother for her faith—"O woman, great is your faith." In Mark's conclusion Jesus praises the woman for talking back to him when he refuses to help her—"For saying that, you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter." *Sunday by Sunday* explores both versions of the story in this issue.

Matthew sees the Canaanite woman as a model of faith. Similarly Martin Luther saw in this woman a Reformation ideal—clinging to Jesus' word in faith, even when the word is no, living by faith and God's word alone.

Mark's Syrophenician woman is different. She speaks out for all those excluded from Jesus' original mission to Jews. Many Christian feminists see in her a foremother who calls women today to speak the truth of their experience in the face of traditions that exclude us, to teach those in authority as she does.

● Which woman are you most like?

● What does Jesus learn in each gospel?

Both versions of the gospel place Jesus in Tyre, north of Galilee and outside Jewish territory. The geographic boundary suggests not only the ethnic boundary between Jew and Gentile but also religious boundaries between spirit and demon, clean and unclean.

Jesus crosses the geographical border quickly at the beginning of the story. In his time Galilean farmers frequently sold their grain to the non-Jewish people of the sea coast for food and export. Commerce led these Jews and Gentiles into familiarity with one another's beliefs, customs, and prejudices. But the words Jesus speaks carry



with them the Jewish prejudice against Gentiles.

The Canaanite woman is a Gentile. In coming to Jesus, she crosses the invisible ethnic and religious boundaries to seek access to healing for her daughter from Jesus. Her petition initiates the action of the story.

Both Matthew and Mark's versions of the gospel preserve Jesus' insulting refusal to help the woman—"It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." This repetition marks these words as the part both writers consider essential to the story.

Perhaps it is the rudeness of Jesus' words that impels Matthew to add dialog that provides a reason for Jesus' refusal to help the woman. Jesus' mission is to the Jewish people, "the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

Also, Matthew makes the woman clearly a believer. He puts in her mouth a formal,

liturgical-sounding petition, addressing Jesus as messiah, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David." She cannot be outside Jesus' mission because she believes he is Israel's messiah, come with power from God. Her faith is the reason Jesus frees her daughter and includes her in his mission. Matthew makes specific that the table from which the woman seeks crumbs is the messiah or master's table.

● How do you picture the woman from Matthew's story?

In both stories Jesus not only refuses to help the Gentile woman, he also insults her. In fact, he uses an ethnic slur when he implies she is a dog. How can Jesus, who everywhere else in the four gospels reaches out to sinners, lepers, and crazy people, express such closed-minded prejudice to this woman?

This story reflects conflicts in Christian communities after

Jesus' death and resurrection. Some Christians must claim that Jesus taught the saying, "Don't throw the children's food to the dogs." Both stories place this saying in Jesus' mouth. His is the voice of authority in the gospel. The Gentile mother faces a tradition that excludes her.

In Mark's gospel, she refuses to accept her exclusion and a future for her child outside the circle of the holy. She counters this prejudice against her with the truth of her own experience. "Sir," she retorts, "even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." She does not regard dogs as unclean animals as Jews do. Both messy children and hungry dogs eat at her house. Her comeback makes space for children and dogs at the same table.

● How do you picture the woman from Mark's story?

Mark places the story of the Syrophenician woman halfway between two feeding stories—the first of more than 5,000 people on the Jewish side of the Sea of Galilee (Mark 6.30-44) and the second of 4,000 on the

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- CAMFED, the Campaign for Female Education, knows that educating African girls and women is the only way out of poverty in Africa. Also visit the UNESCO site: [Left Behind: Girls' Education in Africa.](#)

other, Gentile side of the lake (8.1-10). After the first feeding Jesus' disciples gather up 12 baskets of fragments, more than they had to start. This symbolic number identifies Jesus' disciples as the new community of Israel.

At the second feeding disciples gather seven baskets of fragments, the number of perfection, symbolizing nourishment for all people. At the center, turning point of this section of Mark's narrative is the wit of the Syrophenician woman, laying claim to the children's crumbs for her daughter.

The Syrophenician woman shows leadership, the ability to speak her truth in the face of prejudice. In Mark, she is the foremother who first claims nourishment for Gentiles from Jesus. She gains access to the power of God at work in Jesus for the generation her daughter represents and transforms his *no* into a life-giving word.

- **What practices today exclude you or fail to nourish you?**
- **What Church boundaries does your experience call into question?**
- **What experience do you need to speak?**



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FIRST READING

God's temple is a house of prayer for all.

The first verse of Sunday's first reading opens the ten chapters of Isaiah (56-66) attributed to a prophet or prophets who spoke for God during the rebuilding of Jerusalem between 520 and 444 B.C., a prophet we call Third Isaiah. This verse sounds the theme of the chapters—observe what is right, do what is just.

The exiles returned from captivity in Babylon to a ruined Jerusalem. They had to rebuild homes, the city walls, and the temple. The priests also began to reeducate the people in the law of the covenant.

Speaking for God, the prophet welcomes foreigners into the community of Israel. These are foreigners who seek to belong by observing God's law. These rebuilders envision the temple as a house of prayer for all peoples.

God welcomes all people.

Thus says God, maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come and my deliverance be revealed. The foreigners who join themselves to God, to minister to God, to love God's name, and to be God's servants, all who keep the sabbath

and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant— these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.

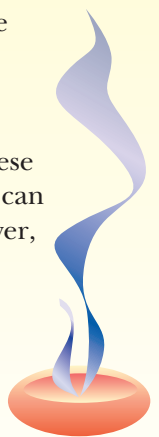
Isaiah 56.1, 6-7

- **What experiences have broadened whom you accept into your house or into your parish Christian community?**
- **Whose presence scares you because you know them too little?**
- **What is your attitude toward immigrants? How does having the same faith as an immigrant group affect your attitude?**

PRAY

Recall times you have used ethnic slurs or any kind of insulting putdown. Make a prayer instead for these people. The groups can respond to each prayer, using the statement below.

ALL: God's healing, liberating love is for all people.



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