

**September 8, 2024**  
**A Changed Heart**  
**Mark 7:24-37**

*<sup>24</sup> From there he 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, <sup>25</sup> but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. <sup>26</sup> Now the woman was a gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. <sup>27</sup> 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." <sup>28</sup> But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." <sup>29</sup> Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." <sup>30</sup> And when she went home, she found the child lying on the bed and the demon gone.*

*<sup>31</sup> Then he returned from the region of Tyre and went by way of Sidon toward the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. <sup>32</sup> They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech, and they begged him to lay his hand on him. <sup>33</sup> He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. <sup>34</sup> Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." <sup>35</sup> And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. <sup>36</sup> Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one, but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. <sup>37</sup> They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."*

Please pray with me:

God be in our heads and in our understanding. God be in our eyes and in our looking.  
God be in our mouths and in our speaking. God be in our hearts and in our thinking.  
Amen.

“Mofly” was his name. We were making posters to promote the Week of Compassion offering that provides disaster relief aid around the world. The posters were to be hung along the sanctuary walls. Three of us, all high-schoolers, worked together to draw a poster of a young African boy, a victim of the severe famine that plagued Ethiopia in the late 70’s. The only way to describe our picture was to call it a caricature. The size of his head was three times larger than his emaciated body. I don’t recall which one of us came up with the name Mofly but it had something to do with the flies we drew – on his face – on his arms. Every time we drew another fly we would laugh hysterically. Eric finished off the picture by writing on the bottom, “Mofly needs YOU.” It was all a big joke.

It makes me shutter with shame when I think about that poster. Rather than promoting any kind of compassion, our poster was dehumanizing and cruel. It displayed an appalling lack of empathy for, or connection with, members of my own human family suffering from a horrendous famine. It was not my finest moment.

In 2003, as a graduate student, Ben Schumaker was a university student studying in Guatemala when he heard the story of a young man who grew up in an orphanage. The young man did not have any pictures of his earliest years or any parents to share memories of his youth. He felt like much of his childhood had been forgotten. Ben was moved by his story and inspired to respond.

Ben returned home and founded The Memory Project where high-school art students create original portraits of children living in orphanages around the world. The purpose of the portraits is to provide them with a special memory of their youth and help honor their heritage and identity. American students painting the portraits receive a digital photo of a child living in an orphanage, refugee camp, or other challenging situation. Some of the photos come with a favorite color, a descriptive word, or other descriptive characteristics. The art students then spend hour upon hour looking at that child – studying that child’s face, especially the eyes. What often happens is that a connection to that child begins to occur. That student begins to wonder about that child. That child becomes a real person. Ben says that is the real aim of this project – to raise the level of compassion. By helping young people learn about international humanitarian issues he hopes to encourage them to grow into adults dedicated to working for positive change. They have connected more than 300,000 people in 56 countries.

Before mailing the original portraits to their subjects, students write their first name, age, and a brief note to their recipient. They trace their own hand as a symbolic way for the recipient to touch the person who made the art, thus connecting them.

It's such a simple idea, connecting people through art - helping students to humanize people they might otherwise be inclined to other.

As a high schooler, if I had looked for hours into the eyes of child in Ethiopia.....if I had studied this child's face...or taken a few moments to better understand the situation....I might have discovered compassion a little sooner. Instead of drawing an obscene caricature, I would have considered the plight of a fellow human being.

Language and practices that humanize people build our capacity for compassion and love of neighbor. Language and practices that dehumanize, erode compassion and promote mistreatment. If we want to guard our hearts we can learn to recognize how we dehumanize.

When we hear political speeches where immigrants being referred to as "animals," we should be concerned.<sup>1</sup> Baseless claims that other countries are "deliberately sending "prisoners, murderers, drug dealers, mental patients and terrorists, the worst they have" to the United States"<sup>2</sup> amplify this dehumanizing rhetoric. This is how hatred is fueled, rights are denied, and genocides are justified...this is how we create "us" and "them." Instead of seeing real human beings we see Mofly...

That said, I find our scripture reading for today deeply disturbing. Jesus doesn't come right out and call the Syrophenician woman a dog, but he most surely infers it. It doesn't sound like the Jesus we know and love. Jesus wouldn't call someone a dog, would he?

As much as we would like to soften his dehumanizing insult, we can't. He says it. But why? Jesus is the one in Gentile territory. He is vacationing, or at least trying to, in the land of the people he is insulting. Who does that?

Is it because she is a Gentile? Is it because he is suffering the irritation that comes with compassion fatigue? Is it because she is a "them," and he is an "us?" Or is it because she is audacious enough to burst into a man's world and assert herself? Is Jesus the one with a heart condition? What is going on?

The truth is that we don't know. What we do know is that she is desperate. Her daughter is tormented, and she is grabbing at straws. She's heard of Jesus. She knows his reputation for healing and setting people free. She falls at his feet, pleading for her

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.msnbc.com/rachel-maddow-show/maddowblog/trumps-dehumanizing-anti-immigrant-rhetoric-takes-literal-turn-rcna146159>

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

daughter's life, just like Jairus did. Jesus rushed to heal Jairus' daughter. But not so for this woman. He says 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.*" If you ask me, it's not his finest hour.

But she rises to the occasion. She challenges Jesus. She uses what agency she has and resists his refusal. She says, "*Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.*"

The story moves right along – but this is where I want to hit pause. Do you suppose Jesus stopped to scratch his head, or stroke his beard, as he took in what this woman was saying to him. Did he have to think about it very long. Did he flashback to the time he told the disciples standing in front of a large crowd, "You give them something to eat!"

It appears that this woman understood what we so often fail to see. In God's economy, there is enough. There is enough love, enough grace, enough blessing even for those we demonize and dehumanize. There is enough, there are even leftovers! It's not a zero-sum game. Her inclusion doesn't mean less for someone else.

When we return to the story, we learn that because of this woman's brilliant response her daughter is healed. It's not because of her faith – but because of this response. Jesus doesn't go with her. The woman goes home, and finds her daughter healed.

So, what do you think? Did he know what he was going to do all along, or did she really persuade him? "Did Jesus have a change of heart?" Did this woman get Jesus to change his mind about extending his ministry to non-Jews? Or is this some kind of lesson for the disciples?

When studying the book of Mark, we can sometimes gain clarity by reading the material before and after the passage we are trying to understand. Before Jesus goes to the Gentile territory of Tyre, he feeds the five thousand people in Jewish territory. There are twelve baskets full of leftovers – twelve being a symbolic number for the twelve tribes of Israel. Then there is a passage about Jesus' conflict with the Pharisees. They were attacking him because his disciples were not following all the traditions of the elders. After our passage is the feeding of four thousand Gentiles – this time seven baskets are left over – seven is number of nations surrounding Israel. It seems that Jesus' encounter with the Syrophenician woman marks a turning point in the gospel. It seems that an opening has been created for non-Jews within the ministry of Jesus. But the question remains, did Jesus have a change of heart? Or was this a teaching moment about inclusion and the kingdom of God?

After his encounter with the Syrophenician woman – Jesus again sets out to another Gentile region. A deaf man is brought to him – a man who has a speech impediment. The people who brought this man to Jesus beg Jesus to heal him. So, Jesus takes him aside. Jesus puts his fingers in the man’s ears. He then spits and touches his tongue. He looks up to the heavens and says, “Be opened.” Immediately, the man can hear and speak.

I can remember the day that the Berlin Wall fell. Two years earlier, President Regan stood in front of that wall saying, “tear down this wall!” The day it finally happened people tore into that wall and spilled through little openings in both directions. They were suddenly connected.

“Be opened!” says Jesus. Little openings happen when we lay down our prejudices and indifference and gaze into the face of the other. Little openings occur when we have dialogue rather than diatribes. Little openings begin to give way to bigger openings when we refuse to demonize and work to humanize. Little openings create connections when we are willing to travel out of our comfort zones and encounter people we have previously judged, or misunderstood, othered. Little openings can appear on the hardest of hearts when courageous people refuse and resist their denial. Little openings are created when high school art students study the eyes and face of a child. “Be opened!” says Jesus.

And what we have in the story of the Syrophenician woman is Jesus being opened. He shows us how it’s done. The opening is created. The connection is made. He gives her something to eat. He sees the woman. He hears the woman. He stands corrected. And Jesus is willing to bear the humiliation or embarrassment or whatever one feels when called out and corrected.

It’s tempting to want to make excuses for Jesus. Just like it is tempting to say I was just a goofy kid who didn’t know better. But excuses don’t change hearts.

Yes! There is enough bread. There is enough compassion. There is enough love. There is enough to draw the circle wider still!