



“Demanding a Yes”

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Mark 7:24-37

My girls think animals are awesome. They have had these wonderful phases where they loved dogs, or dinosaurs, or birds, or bugs. They even went through a phase where they loved penguins. Don't you think penguins are cool, too? I love that the father penguins stay and care for the eggs while the mother penguins travel great distances to find food to bring back to their newly born young. Well, during my kids' penguin phase, I remember reading something about Fairy Penguins. Fairy Penguins are the smallest species of penguin standing at roughly eleven inches tall. They live and breed along the entire coastline of New Zealand and Southern Australia. These penguins are called Fairy Penguins due to their small size, and in New Zealand they are called Little Blue Penguins because of the color of their plumage.

Well, off Philip Island, near Victoria, Australia, there are burrows of thousands upon thousands of fairy penguins. Every morning the adult penguins head out to sea to catch fish. At the end of the day they return to land to bring back food for their chicks. Watching them get from the water to their burrows is both funny and exciting. The penguins surf in on the waves, then gather in groups at the water's edge. Their burrows are 100 yards or so away, with the wide, open space of the sandy beach between them. All of a sudden, a group of penguins would take off, waddling as fast as their little legs could carry them across the beach. But then, having gone ten or twenty yards they'll suddenly turn around and waddle back to the water. They'll wait, then try again. One group makes it, but another performs this strange ritual of turning back. And on it goes, through the dying light of day, until finally the penguins have all crossed the beach and met their chicks in their burrows.

What's going on? Why the strange stop-start-return ritual? The answer's quite simple. At sea the penguins are fast swimmers, able to dive deep. At sea they're safe from predators such as eagles and hawks and other land and air animals. And in their burrows they are safe below ground, but on the open beach they're vulnerable and exposed. On the beach, they can only waddle slowly and are easy targets. So, as they cross the beach, the moment they see a shadow or something out of the corner of their eye, they turn back and race for the safety of the water.

It seems that we humans are a lot like those Fairy Penguins. When confronted with challenging situations we find ourselves like the penguins standing at the water's edge. We know where we've got to go, we know we've got to get across that beach to get back home, but it can be so terrifying. When we step out of the water and start waddling across the vast danger zone, we leave our safety behind, we're in barren land where it's dangerous, uncertain, and where we're vulnerable. Yet, to get to the burrow we must leave safety behind and strike out into unknown and dangerous territory.

In last week's gospel text, Jesus criticized the Pharisees and scribes for their ideas of purity and their judgment of those who did not follow the traditions or conform to their religious standards. Now, as if to put action to his words, Jesus goes to the Gentile region of Tyre, into unclean and impure territory. Jesus left his safe space of Israel and was trying to find some down time, some rest and relaxation, maybe a moment of anonymity in a foreign land. Perhaps he didn't want anyone to know he was there. It could be that he ran from the safety of the sea onto the hostile beach, hoping to escape notice of the crowds and all of the people who needed him. Yet, even in this Gentile region, this unclean area, he can't escape those demanding to be healed, those demanding attention from the Messiah, from those demanding a 'yes' from God.

One of those unclean people who broke through the barrier, the safety zone of pure and impure, was a woman. She was called in the text, "the woman, a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin." This explicit description by Mark is meant to increase her uncleanliness. She is not only in a lower class by being a woman unaccompanied by her husband, but she is a Gentile, a non-Jew, and a Syrophenician who were ancient enemies of Israel. By emphasizing which Gentile land she came from she was doubly marked as an impure individual. She was a foreigner who lived outside the land of Israel and outside the religious laws of Israel too. This extremely impure woman had the audacity to begin a conversation with a man from Israel. She didn't have a choice, she needed a yes from God.

She needed a yes from God because her daughter was possessed by a demon. Although we are not told exactly how the demon affected her daughter, we can probably guess from other encounters with demon possession in the Bible that she was probably deeply troubled, undoubtedly acting bizarrely and in anti-social ways, maybe even harming herself and others. This Gentile woman and her daughter were not the kind of family most people would invite into their homes or religious sanctuaries.

This mother was at the end of her rope and she had nowhere else to turn. She probably heard no after no after no after no from healers and religious leaders and doctors and exorcists. This was probably her last stop and she needed, no, demanded, a yes. And in this mother's despair, Jesus actually had the nerve to say that she was a worthless outsider straight to her face. In fact, if we are to be totally honest, Jesus is caught in the act, caught pronouncing a racial slur. If it were the present day, Jesus would've been videoed on camera and his insensitive remark posted all over You Tube. To tell you the truth, Jesus's words bother me. This desperate woman fell at Jesus' feet and begged him to heal her daughter, and Jesus' response was, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Thud. She was smacked across the face with yet another big 'no' from someone in power and this time with an insensitive and hurtful insult as well. For you see, the "children" in this statement are the children of Israel and the "dogs," or more specifically "little dogs," were understood to be all other peoples who were not Jewish.

I know that you and I procrastinate and scour our social media sites for pictures of adorable puppies. We fawn over their cuteness and their innocence. But in the first century, dogs were not household pets. They were not even work animals. They were scavengers who fed on scraps and filth. So, this mother was not only a nasty, filthy dog but a little dog, a diminutive and insignificant dog. Although Jesus' response was harsh, this was indeed the common response

between Jewish and Gentile people. We might be shocked to hear Jesus say such an insensitive and racist thing, but we can't ignore that the people of God at that time thought everyone else was unclean and separate from God. Although this is a culturally normative response, it doesn't lessen its hurtful sting. We also have to be aware that Jesus was seeking to get away from the exhausting tasks of teaching and healing, and we see a very human side of Jesus, needing a break from all people. While we can't know exactly what Jesus was thinking or feeling, but it is clear that when approached by the Syrophenician woman, Jesus' immediate response was to remember the limits of his mission, his narrow call to serve his own people. Because you remember in Matthew's version of this story, Jesus begins by saying, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

But Jesus' tired state, his cultural advantage, and his religious superiority didn't matter to this desperate mother. She demanded a yes from Jesus. If she was going to be a dog then she was going to act like a dog and be fierce. Dogs fought for their morsels of food and survived on their own resilience. And just like a member of the canine family, this Syrophenician mother fiercely fought for her child, growling and demanding healing from the Son of God. She insisted that her daughter be freed from her enslavement to demonic oppression. And this tenacious, fierce mother came back at Jesus with a clever response, "Sir, even the little dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Thud. Now it was Jesus' turn to be smacked in the spirit by a beloved and equal creation of God. The Syrophenician woman basically scolded Jesus and, as Karoline Lewis, Associate Professor of Preaching at Luther Seminary imagined, "Guess, what? Jesus. God said yes to me. God said yes to me when God tore open the heavens. God said yes to me when God decided to show up in the wilderness rather than in the temple. God said yes to me when you came here instead of spending all your time in Jerusalem. It's okay to be me, so get over yourself, Jesus."

At this point, Jesus could only agree. Jesus could only agree that God's love and healing power knew no boundaries. Jesus could only agree that God's love and healing power knew no political boundaries. Jesus could only agree that God's love and healing power knew no social boundaries. Jesus could only agree and give her a yes. "For demanding a yes, you may go," Jesus says. "The demon has left your daughter." So, she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone. Jesus rewarded the mother for her tenacity, not with the leftovers and the crumbs of the Jewish children, but with a healing and saving banquet of God.

Heidi Husted in the Christian Century magazine said, "In any case, the woman does not back down. Dog indeed! She keeps right on nipping at Jesus' heels, which showcases not only her debating skills, but her faith. She dares to take his metaphor and turn it back on him. "Children get fed before the dogs? You've got that right, Lord! But even the dogs get to eat the children's crumbs; even the pets get the scraps that fall from their master's table!" She is arguing that even on his own terms, there should be something from him – some scrap of grace – for someone like her who comes to him in faith. She is challenging him. "What are you going to do, Lord: Judge me by externals only – or judge me by my heart?" The day the gospel went to the dogs was the day it came to us. We are some of the "dogs" who have received the good news of the gospel! When Jesus opened himself up to mission to the whole world, he opened his church to the world. Now we are to open ourselves to the whole world in mission."

I vacillate between identifying with the doggedly desperate mother needing a yes from God and the religiously and socially prominent Jesus who was tired and aggravated but possessed the power to reach out a hand to those on the margins who are shuffling on the floor of society, needing a boost up to the feast on the table. The message of this sermon could go either way. Whichever character you connect with, we must be a people of faith who realize that our actions in response to a needy world should not end with the crumbs on the floor. We need to be followers who demand that all people, of all races, and ethnicities, and gender identities, and sexual orientations, and economic statuses deserve to be at this table.

As we begin our stewardship season and our program year, we cannot simply get our heavenly morsels one hour a week inside these four walls. Like Jesus himself and his disciples, we are called to a larger mission in the world, one that welcomes all to the feast of God's love, one that calls us to embrace the outsider, the stranger, even the enemy. The world is demanding a yes from Christians who learn from this story Jesus, when he changed his mind after listening and learning from and loving the least of these.

Because, if we look at ourselves closely enough, we might just realize that none of us has the right or privilege to claim a seat at the table of God. We all come as beggars to the table, we all come as the broken to the table, we all come as the lonely to the table, we all come as the sick to the table, we all come as needy to the table, and it is by God's grace that we are fed. Perhaps we need to remember this morning that God's table is larger and more loving and more lavish than we can ever imagine. God seats us all at the table and claims us all as God's beloved children. And even if we did get the crumbs of God, it would be enough for healing and hope and salvation. But in our lives that call out for Jesus to hear us and in the world that demands a yes from God, we must welcome all to the abundant, life-giving feast.

Kaylin Haught wrote a poem called "God Says Yes to Me." And I think it poetically displays God's yes to us. It goes like this:

I asked God if it was okay to be melodramatic
and she said yes
I asked her if it was okay to be short
and she said it sure is
I asked her if I could wear nail polish
or not wear nail polish
and she said honey
she calls me that sometimes
she said you can do just exactly
what you want to
Thanks God I said
And is it even okay if I don't paragraph
my letters
Sweetcakes, God said
who knows where she picked that up
what I'm telling you is
Yes Yes Yes

Church, we must remember that we are both the children and the dogs. We yearn for and demand the scraps at the table. We demand to receive the crumbs of love, the crumbs of hope, the crumbs of salvation. We demand that our 'yesses' be heard. We demand that who we are and what we do bring nourishment to our lives and freedom to all God's children plagued by demons and muted by the powers of the world. We demand that our yeses be heard, that the pleas for help be heard, that the voiceless have a voice. We demand a yes from God, even though we feel useless, tired, and unloved. We demand a yes even though we are plagued by the demons in our lives. We demand a yes as we fight for all children who are victimized in this world. We demand that those who are under the table be welcomed with a seat at the table so we can all partake in the feast of God. We demand that the scraps become salvation. We demand a yes. Yes, Lord. Yes!

Amen.