

This is an uncomfortable text. This is an uncomfortable piece of Mark. It is an uncomfortable picture that we are given of Jesus because frankly, Jesus is using a slur to call out this woman. What Jesus says is not complementary in any way shape or form. It is not anything anyone would consider to be loving, calling her a dog.

There are certainly people who would try to contort these words and make it so that Jesus isn't saying something that is nearly as bad. Perhaps Jesus is just talking about little puppies, and honestly who can be angry at a little puppy?

That isn't what is happening. Jesus is not being a nice guy in this text. That makes us uncomfortable. This discomfort is like last week's text where we were told that it isn't anything that enters the body that causes sin, but something that we have within ourselves that causes evil. Mark can be a very uncomfortable book.

Our impulse when confronted with that reality, is to try to take what Jesus has said and cram it into a box to make it what we want Jesus to be. If we can make what Jesus says palatable to ourselves maybe it will be okay. This image that we get of Jesus is deeply disturbing.

Let's examine what is happening in this passage. Jesus is trying to take a break, so he goes north out of Israel. He is in a different country, a foreigner in this place where he is trying to get some peace and quiet. Then this gentile woman, who lives in the area but is from somewhere else, implied in this description is the idea that she would be wealthy. She comes to Jesus and asks that he cast an unclean spirit out of her daughter.

If you are keeping score, we have Jesus who is: a man, a rabbi, and a healer. He is also: in a different country, poor, and a stranger. Then we have this woman who is: wealthy, living in the area, but also a woman who has an unclean spirit in her daughter. It is difficult to navigate who would have the upper hand. It is worth noting that Jesus isn't abandoning her, but rather prioritizing the children of Israel, the Jewish people. That isn't to say that once he does this, he is going to leave them in the lurch. Jesus is still very much going to focus on the Jewish people in his ministry, and he is going to bring the gentiles along. Even if we have all these details sorted out, this story isn't any more palatable.

This woman's daughter is suffering. Jesus calls her a dog. That is what we get to deal with.

Her response, that even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the table. Having children, I know that mealtime produces a fair number of crumbs. She is saying, this is bigger. She has faith that there can be more. Part of this confidence is that her daughter is sick. This woman is desperate. It is a very thin line between faith and desperation. The two go hand in hand. If you aren't desperate, you wouldn't bring yourself to believe in something. She sees that the Kingdom of God is big enough. At least that is what she is hoping for. This is her last chance. She has placed her hope in this stranger, from a different country, who speaks a different language, who practices a different religion. Maybe just maybe they can help my daughter.

In that response we are reminded of the nature of our relationship with God. We have this idea that you don't question God. We have some misconstrued version of the bible where that doesn't ever happen. That isn't the case. Abraham argues with God. Jacob argues, to the point of wrestling with God. The prophets argue with God. When that happens, God changes God's mind. The relationship that God has with us, on which our faith is built, is not one sided. It isn't just God pouring out. We have been given a voice, an opportunity to speak to God honestly and authentically. In those moments of desperation, we can show that. This woman is joining that tradition, hoping that she can find some solace for her daughter. Tying her hope to the idea that God's love is sufficient even for outsiders.

We hear about that in the psalm we read today, as well as the reading from James. It is a common theme in scripture, God's love is sufficient for outsiders. God's love is available for them as well.

Tomorrow is Labor Day, and I don't like to bring up secular holidays when I am preaching because I believe that the church is bigger than that. It is hard, however, to find a better metaphor for people who have seen the possibility of abundance in the world; and out of hope and desperation they said that they deserve that too, than the labor movement.

This year we are commemorating the 100th anniversary of The Battle of Blair Mountain. Where a group of people were tired of having their families starved by coal companies in Appalachia. So they banded together to demand a living wage and better hours. We notice that our children are not sweeping chimanes in factories. These are things that we would take for granted, having weekends and child labor laws. That wasn't always the case. The people organizing the labor movement saw that there was abundance available and out of desperation said no, we should be able to survive too.

We look at the reading from James and hear about not showing partiality in our love, about not showing favor to those who we believe are going to be some net benefit to ourselves, or congregation. But to actually look to the way that the world is, to see that the status quo shows favoritism to those who are already ahead and to embrace those who do not fit in or work out as well. We are told to love the people who are forgotten. We are called in our daily existent to see and proclaim that God's love and abundance is for them. That is good news because that means that God's love and abundance is for us as well. Frankly we are not deserving. Yet here it is.

You are blessed and beloved children of God. You are not going to be punished when you cry out in desperation. You are embraced and filled with the Holy Spirit. That is the good news. We are called to take this good news and go to love our neighbor in the same way. When we encounter suffering say not. God's abundance is better than this. Justice, as Dr. Cornell West points out, is what love looks like in public. This woman's response to Jesus expands that love.

The spirit that was tormenting her daughter is exercised. Jesus is pushed to new parameters in his ministry. The gospel of Mark is all about God crossing boundaries into places where we do not expect God to be. Jesus' first act of ministry in Mark is Jesus casting out a demon in a man across the sea who is hanging out in a cemetery breaking a whole lot of social norms. God is where God is not expected to be. That is Mark's whole deal.

The kingdom of God is going to be present and offered to even more people. Jesus after this encounter, is going further into gentile territory presumably still healing people. As he is returning, before he is back on his home turf, he is brought this man who is deaf and mute, and Jesus heals him.

We go from saying "you people are not the top priority," to "okay, hear, speak."

Prayer is an act of desperation. God responds to that prayer. God's love is brought out in that act. That is such good news. We don't have to act as though we need to stuff through the world believing that everything happens for a reason or some other bumper sticker theological claim. We can be honest, authentic, and desperate in God's presence. We find again and again in scripture that is not the case. We find in scripture that even in those places we don't image God would show up, God's abundance overflows. Amen.