

Sermon – Mark 7:24-37  
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“Syrophoenician Lives Matter”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. It's after Labor Day. School has been in session for two weeks now here at Grace. This means that I've had plenty of opportunities to be reminded of how difficult mornings are; how challenging it is for the five of us to get out the door on time each and every day. There are plenty of reasons for this, but among these reasons are rampant indecisiveness and the changing of minds. From picking a breakfast cereal – “Cheerios, no wait, Honey Nut Cheerios, no wait, Special K with Red Berries, oh, I'll just have toast” to picking out a t-shirt – “Darth Vader, no, Stormtroopers, no Chewbacca” – it's maddening and time consuming. And I haven't even talked about my children yet; those are just the decisions I struggle with! But really, why can't people just make decisions and stick to them? This is no less frustrating with adults than it is with children. Perhaps in an effort to achieve efficiency, we've turned decisiveness into an absolute virtue and the changing of one's mind into a sin. It can get politicians into trouble – well, it could, when politicians could get into trouble – leaving them open to charges of flip-flopping at best, or rank hypocrisy at worst. Consistency. That's what we want. We call it strength and integrity. We value it in our children, our leaders, and ourselves. We project it onto God with words like immutable and unchanging. But should we? Is certainty a virtue? Is that who and how God is?
2. The gospel picks up today with Jesus taking a break and trying to get away. He heads into Gentile territory, hoping that those who have long been hostile

to his people will be indifferent to his presence. A Syrophenician woman, desperate in the face of her daughter's bondage to demonic power, comes to Jesus and begs Jesus to heal the girl. This seems like the sort of thing that would be right up Jesus' alley. But his mind is made up. He, an Israelite, has come to save the children of Israel; come to save them *from the likes of her*. Jesus refuses, and not kindly, either: "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." The dogs. He refuses the request of a desperate mother, and calls her a dog in the process. Withholding of healing and name calling; these are bad enough behaviors for the Son of God but what happens next is worse. She replies, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." And Jesus, Son of God Incarnate, *changes his mind* and heals her daughter. What are we dealing with here? If Jesus, God's Son, can't be trusted to stay the course, well, where does that leave us?

3. It leaves us standing in this woman's shoes, standing face to face with Jesus Christ. She knew that Jesus was right. She did not argue that she deserved anything; did not argue that she had equal standing to the children of Israel; she didn't really argue at all. She simply knew that this Jesus was her daughter's only hope, and she clung to faith that the goodness of Jesus' God was big enough to not only fill a tabletop, but that it was a goodness so great that it would fill the table – fill this earth – and then fall, overflowing, to the floor. Even to her daughter. Even to herself. And in the face of such faith, such rightness about his own mission, Jesus can't really do anything but agree with her. Even if that means changing course and changing his mind. And in that moment, we see the face and the grace of God. For what is grace if not a divine change of mind? This woman doesn't deserve it, and neither do we. God had said how sinners would be dealt with. And then, as Jesus walks the earth and looks into our eyes, the story changes. Jesus flip-flops. God's mind changes. Instead of punishment, healing. Instead of death, life. Instead of dogs

- clawing after crumbs, we ourselves are invited, fully human for the first time, to the table of grace.
4. In this grace, the story between God and us changes forever. Jesus soon encounters a man who can neither hear nor speak. “Ephphatha,” Jesus says. “Be opened.” The man’s ears take in the voice of his Lord, his tongues lets loose a song of praise! But this only happens, it seems, because of what happened first; because of the Syrophenician woman who opened her mouth and spoke her mind right to Jesus’ face, and because Jesus met her with open ears and mind open to her cries. Ephphatha! Be opened! Where the way once seemed closed between God and us, in Christ we see God’s mind changed and the way opened forever. Thank God that God doesn’t value consistency over grace, or immutability over us.
  5. And if this is true, then what are we to say to and about one another? James reminds us today that we make distinctions among ourselves, privileging wealth and status, not to mention skin color, and denigrating those who seem different, lower, less than. But if Jesus can value this unnamed woman and her daughter, whom will Jesus not value? And if Jesus extends grace and healing to all, then from whom shall we withhold value and worth? Ephphatha! Be opened! This is a gospel imperative for us. In the face of cries for decency and dignity, it seems that we could at least open our ears and listen to others as they speak of suffering to us. We are reminded this week of the challenges of racism within our national narrative. When our neighbors cry, “Black Lives Matter,” we could at least say, “I agree. You do matter. To me, and to God. Let me listen to your story.” Sure beats setting your sneakers on fire and insisting there aren’t deep, systemic problems to address. Be open, ears – be open, people. These are Jesus’ words to us today.
  6. Jesus, after all, had plenty of reasons to not value Syrophenician lives. But he changed his mind. About what people do you need to change your mind,

your heart? As we think and pray about these hard things, we also hear Jesus inviting us to the table once more. To be a dog eating crumbs from the table of grace would be enough, but the gifts of Jesus' crucified body, his poured-out blood, are so capacious that God needs a table more spacious, with gracious seats prepared for each of us, now a child of God. You were once far off, a sinner separated from God by your own fault. You were once under condemnation, but Jesus changed his mind. Now you have a place at the table. And those other people? The ones you're sure don't belong, whoever they might be? They're at the table, too. Perhaps God is working to change our minds, as well, and with our minds, the world. But first, the abundant crumbs of grace, the feast of life at which we, of all people, have been given seats. So come and eat. There's more than enough. Filled with grace, who knows what will happen next? Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.