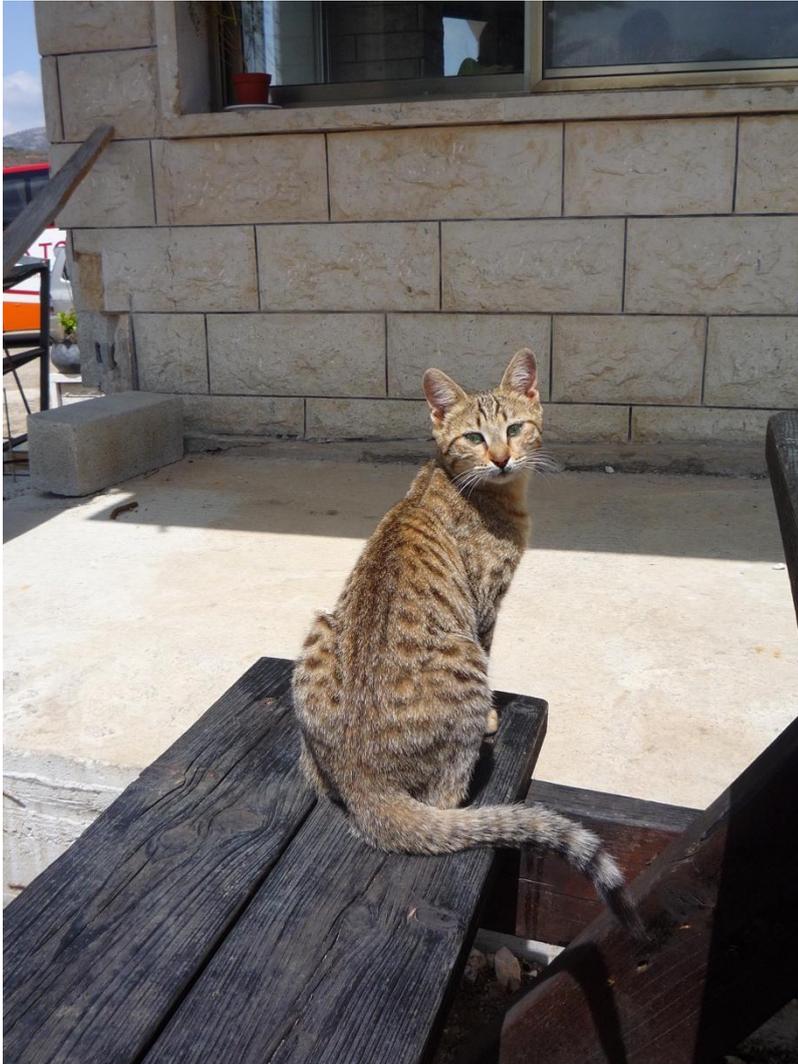


Going to the dogs: Mark 7.24-37.

Never work with children and animals! You don't have to go far in northern Galilee to cross into other territories. When our pilgrim coach drove up to the Golan heights, we stopped at a Druze village cafe for some welcome hospitality. No dogs, but a scrawny kitten, scavenging for crumbs under the tables, reminded me of this story. Thanks to Linda for today's TFTD.



“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, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. 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.” Mark 7. 24-27

Whatever’s going on with Jesus? Why is he acting so out of character, so grumpy when this poor woman is simply seeking help for her sick daughter?

Today's passage is set in the territory of Tyre and Sidon, the seacoast area north of Galilee, around Beirut in what we know today as Lebanon. This area was a meeting across cultures, boundaries, and borders, and yet even here in a foreign place, a Gentile city, Jesus is known. For out of the shadows comes a woman, a Syrophenician. Whatever else this woman is, she is determined and intelligent for she loses no time in declaring her desperation - her daughter is seriously ill, tormented by a demon! Jesus' initial response is harsh indeed: "*Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.*"

It's always tempting to tame the character of Jesus, but Christian tradition by and large embraces the fact that Jesus is a powerful and complex figure. I suspect we would not be so bothered by these unkind words if they had been directed against the Jewish leadership of his day. For Jesus, the Jewish people are uniquely the children of God and this is the children's bread. Against this background the woman accepts the priority of the Jewish community without question but on the other hand, that priority does not deter her from making her own claim on Jesus' healing.

Mark is careful to tell us she is a Syrophenician by birth, the descendent of an ancient, proud, and accomplished people. A nation of merchants and seafarers who at one time had dominated the entire Mediterranean and had vied with Rome for the control of the known world. She could claim an ethnic privilege of her own. Perhaps she could even claim the privilege of wealth. Certainly, it's on her own turf and among her own people that this conversation takes place. It is Jesus and not the woman, who is the foreigner here. But she makes no such claims, we see her greatness in her determination not to take 'No' for an answer. She points out that even the dogs underneath the table eat from the children's leftovers. She is implying that there is more than enough to go around!

There is that reference to abundance which should grab our attention because it sounds a recurring theme in Mark's gospel: the theme of plenty where scarcity was expected, of power where weakness was expected, of greatness where failure had been expected. The mustard seed grows into a huge tree, the seed that falls on deep and fertile soil yields a hundredfold, the five loaves feed five thousand with 12 baskets of leftovers, the sower throwing his seed all over the place. As Mark's Gospel unfolds the point becomes clear, the apparent insignificance of certain people and things, which in the world's eyes amounts to very little, are in effect the key to true effectiveness.

We're not even told this woman's name, so unimportant, so of no-account she must have seemed even to the disciples that witnessed her exchange with Jesus. And yet what she proclaimed and what she exemplified continues to challenge and encourage us today, for the question then becomes, how does this text interact with our world today. Who are the marginalized voices speaking truth to power? There

are so many images to choose from: Reclaiming the Streets, Black Lives Matter, Extinction Rebellion, the list goes on and on.

At last society is slowly opening up, schools have now gone back, and Sunday gave us the opportunity to gather (socially distanced) for shared worship – amazing! It felt like Easter Day in the middle of Lent. And the final prayer before receiving the sacrament:

*We do not presume
to come to this your table, merciful Lord,
trusting in our own righteousness,
but in your manifold and great mercies.
We are not worthy
so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table.
But you are the same Lord
whose nature is always to have mercy.*

Our passage today tells the story of the compassionate mercy of God, the persistence of faith, and the gift of bread - they are all bound up together as we gather, as we receive a meagre morsel, a few crumbs, which by God's mercy becomes for us the finest gift, the words of hope and our life renewed.

Every blessing, Linda

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