

2021 Episcopal Address
Did Jesus Just Call That Woman a Dog?
Jesus: Waymaker

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 Episcopal Address – Dakotas Annual Conference
 June 11, 2021 – Mark 7:24-30 (CEB)

²⁴ Jesus left that place and went into the region of Tyre. He didn't want anyone to know that he had entered a house, but he couldn't hide. ²⁵ In fact, a woman whose young daughter was possessed by an unclean spirit heard about him right away. She came and fell at his feet. ²⁶ The woman was Greek, Syrophenician by birth. She begged Jesus to throw the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷ He responded, "The children have to be fed first. It isn't right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs." ²⁸ But she answered, "Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." ²⁹ "Good answer!" he said. "Go on home. The demon has already left your daughter." ³⁰ When she returned to her house, she found the child lying on the bed and the demon gone.

Prayer Song #263: When Jesus the Healer passed Through Galilee
When Jesus the healer passed through Galilee, Heal us, heal us today!
The deaf came to hear and the blind came to see. Heal us, Lord Jesus.
The lepers were healed and the demons cast out. Heal us, heal us today!
A bent woman straightened to laugh and to shout. Heal us, Lord Jesus. Amen.

It's been quite a year and a half, hasn't it? Never could you and I have imagined what our life would be like on June 11, 2021. The coronavirus was

initially reported to the World Health Organization on December 31, 2019 with these words “[Retrospective investigations](#) by Chinese authorities have identified human cases of the coronavirus with the onset of symptoms in early December 2019.” On January 23, 2020, China imposed an absolute [lockdown](#) in the city of Wuhan. For more than two months, only a few of its eleven million residents could leave their apartments. Anyone displaying symptoms was taken to [hastily-built quarantine centers](#) to [prevent family infections](#). On January 30, the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global health emergency.

Like all other states, the Dakotas did not escape being impacted by the coronavirus. Yet the Dakotas have become national leaders by the percentage of COVID vaccines distributed. As of June 7, North Dakota ranked #3 in the country with 89% of vaccines administered, and South Dakotas ranked #19 with 83.31% of [vaccines administered](#).

I commend you for the careful and prayerful way in which, as clergy and lay leaders in the Dakotas, you are creatively engaging in vital worship, pastoral care, and outreach during this tender time. We desire our congregations to be positioned in such a way as to emerge strong from COVID with a new normal and a clear sense of purpose and understanding of their mission field.

What have we learned over the past fifteen months? If nothing else, we are more convinced than ever that we are all connected in Jesus Christ, the one who makes a way for us.

We realize that we are one human family and that what affects one person in a far corner of the world affects all of us. We are literally all in this together and are called to watch over one another in love.

I have seen a massive outpouring of creativity and imagination in our local churches. People are helping people. Congregations are discovering new ways to reach out into their communities. Clergy are reinventing themselves. Innovation is flourishing. Differences have been set aside. We are seeing our common humanity before God and are responding with compassion. But wait a minute. Where is Christ's compassion? **Didn't Jesus just call that woman (begging for help) a dog?**

What in the world is going on here? What is Jesus doing? Is he tired? Are others pressuring him? Is he disillusioned? Is Jesus showing some racial profiling here? If we look at the beginning of the gospel of Mark, we witness Jesus healing a paralyzed man, feeding five thousand hungry people, freeing a demon-possessed man, walking on water, and healing the sick wherever he goes. All kinds of people beg Jesus to allow them to grasp even the hem of his clothing, for everyone who touches Jesus is made whole. (Mark 7:8)

Right before this scripture takes place, Jesus is in Jerusalem where the Pharisees and legal experts criticize him because the disciples are eating food with unclean hands. Jesus defends himself, saying, “You ignore God’s commandment while holding on to rules created by humans... Clearly, you are experts at rejecting God’s commandment in order to establish these rules.” Bring it on, Jesus!

It’s precisely at this point that Jesus leaves Jerusalem and goes into the region of Tyre, which is in Gentile territory. Tyre had a polarized population of both Jews and non-Jews, and they were bitter enemies. There were different nationalities, cultures, and religions. Jesus enters a house because he doesn’t want anyone to know where he is, but Jesus can’t hide. A woman whose young daughter is possessed by an unclean spirit finds out about Jesus and falls at his feet. She’s not a Jew, mind you. She’s Greek, Syrophenician by birth.

This woman is not intimidated whatsoever. She begs Jesus to throw the demon out of her daughter, but Jesus pushes back. “Look, the children have to be fed first. It’s not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.” **Wait a minute. Did Jesus, the Waymaker, just call that woman a dog?** Well, that’s pretty nasty, insensitive, and dumb of Jesus, wasn’t it? Jesus clearly lays down a line of privilege.

The “children,” of course, are the Jews, and the Syro-Phoenician woman is not a Jew. The “children” are the children of Israel and the “dogs” are the Gentiles.

It's a metaphor found in other Jewish writings. Now I don't know why Jesus snaps at the woman like this. It's unseemly and unbecoming of Jesus. Maybe he's tired or weary of fighting with the Pharisees. Maybe he's being coy or ironic! Or maybe Jesus just needs some alone time. We know Jesus felt harassed and pressured at times, and many of you have felt that, too! We all know what that's like.

The mother is like a bulldog, though. She, too, has heard about Jesus and his reputation and believes that he is better than this. She refuses to give up and flings the insult back. "Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs. I am *not* outside of humanity, I am *not* a dog, and I will *not* give in because my daughter is a child of God, too."

"Good answer!" Jesus says, without hesitation or argument. "Go on home. The demon has already left your daughter." When the woman returns to her house, she finds her child lying on the bed and the demon gone. The very moment Jesus concedes the argument, the demon leaves. Huh!

I don't know about you, but for me, this is an ugly, disturbing moment in the gospels. Which reminds us that the scourge of racism continues to call us to accountability for the ways in which our communities and our country continue to engage in violent acts of systemic oppression. What's going on here? Did Jesus really diss the Syro-Phoenician woman? Is Jesus blinded by his own pre-conceived notions of who is in and who is out? Has Jesus been overcome by his bigotry? Or

is he just having a no good, horrible, very bad day, like we all have from time to time?

Or is there something more here? Let's take another look at the dialogue. The Greek word that Mark uses for the woman who enters the house in search of help for her daughter is *Gyne* (jine), from which we get the word "gynecology". The use of the word *Gyne* indicates that this woman has social status.ⁱ She is a Greek "lady," which means that she trumps Jesus and could tell him what to do and where to go. But she chooses another way.

Notice that Jesus and the woman are alone, which is unusual in itself. In a gesture of humility, this woman of status, this *Gyne*, bows down at his feet and begs Jesus, the Waymaker, to exorcise the demon out of her daughter. It wasn't proper in the ancient world for a woman to directly address a man, but in this story the woman uncharacteristically initiates the conversation.

And Jesus responds, "The children have to be fed first. It isn't right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs." Jesus uses the word "children," indicating that non-Jews have to wait their turn.

Now, Jesus normally gets the punchline in these stories, but in this case, the *Gyne*, the lady, has the last word. Choosing not to exert her authority, she says, "But even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." You see, the *gyne* is not asking for a teaching but a healing. She isn't seeking to argue but to advocate.

The woman is simply asking Jesus, the Waymaker, to make a way by considering the worth of her daughter, a child of God. “Good answer!” Jesus says. “Go on home. The demon has already left your daughter.”

This story reminds me that, at times, we who claim to be Christ-followers assume that we are the insiders who are telling the outsiders about Jesus. Yet the reality is that no one is outside of God’s love. The truth is that we all need to do more listening and less defending. We all need to show more grace and less hate; more humility and less pride. And we all need to be changed at times by people on the “outside,” so to say, by the “dogs,” by those who have a different perspective.

But didn’t Jesus just call this woman a dog? Yes, he did. But Jesus changed his mind and made a way. In this story, both Jesus and the Syrophenician woman walk away transformed, healed, and strengthened. If Jesus could change his mind because he loved the woman and listened to her plea, might we also be open to humbly changing our minds by deep listening? I remind you that shortly after this story, Jesus was given the opportunity to practice what he just learned by feeding four thousand Gentiles.

You see, you and I are such insiders that we forget that this Syrophenician woman, the outsider, is us. She is our ancestor, our foremother in the faith. And so, when we come to the Lord’s table, we, too, hope to catch the crumbs of God’s mercy and grace not instead of, but in addition, to God’s first family. The good

news is that, as it was for the Syrophenician woman, even the crumbs that fall from the table are more than enough. Even the leftovers of God's grace and mercy are more than enough to heal, save, redeem, forgive, and bring those of us who have ever felt like outsiders into God's fold. And Jesus gives us far more than leftovers!

My friends, these next months are going to be challenging for The United Methodist Church. Thank you for being the church of our Waymaker, Jesus Christ, eager to share the hope that is in us. Thank you for staying the course over these last fifteen months of COVID by reinventing yourself in ministry and doing everything you can to embody the good news of Jesus Christ. Thank you for living out the vision of the Dakotas Annual Conference for all congregations to embrace God's call to grow in love of God and neighbor, reach new people, and heal a broken world. And thank you for prioritizing relationships with one another during this tender time.

I know it's hard, and we're all tired and stressed right now, but Jesus will make a way for us. Jesus WILL make a way for us. This past year has not been lost. Rather, we have seen an outpouring of creativity and disciple-making and outreach and evangelism that is making a huge difference in our congregations. This is our chance as United Methodists to be evangelists, for people all over the Dakotas are yearning to find meaning and hope.

Some of you went kicking and screaming into online worship. But imagine this! As one example of the creativity of many of our congregations right now, Turtle Lake United Methodist Church in North Dakota, a congregation that only had a rotary phone a year ago, now has Internet access and is livestreaming worship on Facebook. Hallelujah! And guess what? There are many churches like Turtle Lake all over the Dakotas!

Finally, as we continue to wait for a General Conference that is now postponed until 2022, we know it is unlikely that the center of our denomination will hold together. New expressions of Methodism may emerge, including the Liberation Methodist Connexion, the Global Methodist Church, along with the current The United Methodist Church and perhaps others. At the same time, we continue to be connected in Christ by having incredible opportunities to witness to Christ's love, make a difference, and share ministries together. I honor and respect each one of you, clergy and laity, for your commitment to Christ and the church.

I especially want to express my deep gratitude to the members of the Strategy Team, under the leadership of Al Roll. The Strategy Team continues to meet every other week in order to help us remain connected as brothers and sisters in Christ during this tender time, find common ground, and discern a way into the future of the Methodist movement in the Dakotas so that there is a spiritual home for everyone.

One thing I have learned in the short time that I have been your episcopal leader is that there are deep relationships that span theological lines in this Conference. Although there is an understanding that some churches and pastors will feel called to align with other expressions of Methodism in the future, there is also a value and desire to create a vision for the continuing UMC in the Dakotas - one that is inclusive of traditionalists, centrists, and progressives, believing that our diversity enhances our movement and our witness to the world. Creating that vision requires deep listening. And so, to assist me and Conference leadership in this process, I am creating a special task force that will function in tandem with the Strategy Team.

The purpose of the Strategy Team has been and will continue to be focused on how we might imagine new ways of shared mission and ministry across denominational lines as well as how we can support and equip churches and leaders in navigating future changes in our denomination. This new task force will focus on beginning to clarify and articulate the vision and values for those who feel called to remain in the Dakotas Conference of The United Methodist Church.

I will work with the District Superintendents and extended cabinet this summer to identify individuals who can reflect the diversity of this Conference - diversity of age, race, gender, sexuality, church size, and geography. However, beyond making diversity simply about those persons named to the task force, I will

also charge this group with joining me in identifying ways to listen to voices across this diversity spectrum throughout the Conference. I will also ask them to share with me and the Annual Conference what they are hearing and discerning.

Though we may not know exactly what the future looks like, I believe this group can help move forward the important work of becoming a diverse and inclusive United Methodist Church where those members who disagree on issues of theological interpretation will still worship together and do mission and ministry together, will still work to welcome, affirm, and empower people to live out their calling as beloved children of God, and will still strive to make disciples for Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

In the midst an uncertain future, my prayer is that you will continue to reach out into your communities with grace, humility, and hope and watch over one another in love. For when all was said and done, Jesus, the Waymaker, the One who made a way where there was no way, affirmed that there are no dogs in the human community. There are only precious children of God. And so, with all of God's children, may we continue to learn from one another, confront hatred and bigotry, reach out to the least, the last, and the lost, and seek the common good. Most of all, may Jesus give us the power to share the gospel in new and creative ways that we never imagined before, for God is not done with us yet.

In all of these ways, United Methodists are absolutely vital to the health and welfare of the Dakotas. So, keep on following Jesus, the Waymaker, and watching over one another in love. Keep on reaching out. Keep on inviting others to “taste and see.” Keep on innovating. Keep on sharing the good news. And keep on discerning in humility and wisdom how God invites each one of us to transform hearts and minds. Wait a minute. **Didn’t Jesus just call you “beloved child of God?”**

Prayer Song:

The twelve were commissioned and sent out in twos; Heal us, heal us today!
To make the sick whole and to spread the good news. Heal us, Lord Jesus.
There’s still so much sickness and suffering today. Heal us, heal us today!
We gather together for healing, and pray: Heal us, Lord Jesus.

¹ *The Dynamic of Humility and Wisdom: The Syrophoenician Woman and Jesus in Mark 7:24-31a*, Christopher E. Alt, Boston College School of Theology and Ministry, 2012, p. 4.