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**“Everyone Has Something to Learn”**

**Mark 7:24-30** | *Read the scripture online* <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=214651575>

In his book *How Starbucks Saved My Life*, Michael Gates Gill, a Yale graduate and long-time advertising executive who, along his wife, brushed elbows with the likes of Ernest Hemmingway and Jackie Kennedy, writes of how he found himself at age 63 divorced, unemployed, uninsured, supporting a young child, and at the end of his savings. One chilly March morning, wandering through his childhood neighborhood, he winds up entering an Upper East Side Starbucks to grab a latte and a chance to clear his head. Unbeknownst to him, he also stumbled into a Starbucks hiring fair; and, after learning that Starbucks offers health insurance to their employees, found himself sitting across the table from a 28-year old African-American woman, the daughter of a deceased addict and an unnamed father, answering her question: “Would you like a job?” with an honest, earnest, “Yes, I would like a job.”<sup>1</sup>

Gill writes of his first year as a Starbucks employee, where he learns under the adept tutelage of Crystal, his manager and the other Starbucks Partners, how to start over in life. He learns how to clean the grout in the floor tiles, run a register, connect with customers, and call out drink orders. And along the way he learns about humility and perseverance, about grace and cooperation, about service and even forgiveness. Gill's story is just one of many in this world that supports the old adage: everyone has something to learn.

From the looks of our text for today, a story told by both Mark and Matthew, it looks as if even Jesus has something to learn.

After finishing a great debate with the Pharisees, we next encounter Jesus in the vicinity of Tyre. He enters a house, we are told, and like a celebrity seeking sanctuary away from the public eye, does not want anyone to know where he is. He tries to escape the paparazzi of his day: those who follow him around, intruding on his space not with zoom lenses and tabloid magazines but with needs and requests, with bodies and hearts and spirits in need of healing. Jesus' life is filled with constant cries for help, and he just can't get away—not even for some time to pray.

Once more, Jesus retreat is interrupted; this time by an unnamed woman, who bursts through the doors of this home and throws herself at his feet. She approaches Jesus boldly, with desperate cries on behalf of her young daughter, who has been overcome with an unclean spirit. It is likely, commentators tell us, that this woman was a widow, for in Jesus' time her husband would have been the one to make the approach. But, we don't need to dig deep to know that there were cultural lines that separated Jesus and this woman. We read that she is Greek, and therefore Gentile; a woman born in Syrian Phoenicia. And we know that her gender alone is further cause for segregation. Furthermore, she is the mother of a daughter with an unclean spirit, perhaps a mental illness, whose condition renders her outcast and unclean.



To the woman in our text for today, these lines just don't matter. Not only does she know the gravity of her daughter's need, she also knows what is possible with Christ. We read in her encounter with Jesus an unsettling dialogue that unfolds between them. Jesus' words are not typically Jesus in any way. They do not seem like the language of the one who welcomed little children or ate with tax collectors and prostitutes. Not only are his words exclusive, at best; at worst, they may even be perceived to be laden with the racist slurs of the time. He likens this desperate woman, and her family, to dogs: the lowest of the low, the most unclean creatures around, claiming that her daughter, her child, is not among the children that he has been sent to save. This is not the Jesus we know, is it?

It is not surprising that commentators aren't quite sure what to make of this dialogue, of this picture of Jesus. Some argue that Jesus never said these words, while others argue that he said them as a teaching device to illuminate the divisive rhetoric of the day. Others argue that Jesus was simply stating a theological reality: that he came first to save the Jews and that her invitation was simply not on the agenda. Others suggest that this passage points out the human side of Jesus, showing us that he got tired and overwhelmed, sometimes, too. Barbara Brown Taylor writes:

*Since Jesus was human being as well as the son of God, it seems fair to guess what might have been going on with him. He was discouraged and weary and a long way from home. Every time he turned around someone wanted something from him, but at the same time no one wanted what he most wanted to give—namely, himself, in terms of who he was for them and not only in terms of what he could do for them.<sup>2</sup>*

As much as we ourselves might want to explain Jesus' words away, we can't. After all, we've been here too. We have had these encounters: with the person who has asked for help one time too many; with the person whose misfortune is related to their own bad decision-making; with the person who we really want to help but their calls come at the most inconvenient times; when we're exhausted, or broke, or having a bad day. This passage shows what we know from our own experience: that everyone has a line.

And somehow these lines earn meaning. Whether they are the guidelines we impose as we discern who should be the beneficiary of our charitable giving, or if they are the lines we draw to determine which children will be ideal friends for our kids, lines are everywhere. As the dust settles from the Republican and Democratic National Conventions, it is clear to see that lines are a part of the national political debate: tools that parties will use to communicate platforms, and tools that citizens will use to determine for whom they will vote. With pervasive debates over healthcare, immigration, taxes, marriage equality, reproductive rights and new voter identification legislation, lines are being drawn all around us.

Yet we hear voices around us today calling for something different, challenging us to step across or break down or redefine the lines that have gained power in our culture: the power to keep human beings separate from one another, from sharing our needs, from caring for each other. Elie Wiesel writes:



*For Jews and Christians alike, as well as for Muslims and all persons of religious faith, being human means - must mean - to see each other's humanity...It is the others' humanity that shapes my own...To the homeless, the poor, the beggar, the victims of AIDS and Alzheimer's, the old and the humble, the prisoners in their prison, and the wanderers in their dreams, it is our sacred duty to stretch out our hand and say: 'In spite of what separates us, what we have in common is our humanity.'*<sup>3</sup>[3]

In May of 2001, National Public Radio (NPR)'s "This American Life" aired a show focusing on the theme of "Neighbors." Act two of this production featured a segment in which journalist Davy Rothbart visits Pittsburgh to interview America's favorite neighbor, Mr. Rogers. After reminiscing for a bit about a childhood visit that Rothbart had with Mr. Rogers and his family at his Nantucket summer home, and after visiting with some familiar friends from the *Neighborhood of Make Believe*, Rothbart asks Mr. Rogers to weigh in on an argument he has been having with his upstairs neighbor. Rothbart and his roommate enjoy playing music in their apartment. On many occasions, their music has been punctuated with the sound of a broom handle banging against the floor of the apartment above: neighbor speak for "cut it out." In spite of trying to set quiet hours and trying to communicate with words and not the likes music and broom handles, Rothbart seeks Mr. Rogers' wisdom about where to draw the line on this matter. First, Mr. Rogers points out the obvious middle ground, that he can enjoy his music and his neighbor enjoy her silence if Davy wears headphones. But quickly Mr. Rogers suggests a more excellent way and says:

"I have a feeling you're getting to know Julie, though. And once you do know her, then either your music isn't going to bother her so much or you're going to care so much about her that you'll probably turn it down a couple notches anyway."<sup>4</sup> And that's exactly what happened.

Mr. Rogers points out, in his wisdom, that if we begin to break down those lines that divide us, claiming only that which is of interest to ourselves and concerning that which is of importance to another, then community emerges where there was once separation.

In our text for today, the unnamed woman crosses the line. She refuses to claim the limitations the culture places on her life's situation. She refuses to be hindered by a doorway. She refuses, even, to be limited by Jesus' words. The woman in our text sees the human need of her own child and prioritizes it within a system that would easily write her daughter off as dead. She gives voice to the voiceless, advocating not for herself but for another, claiming her daughter's significance as part of a human family. Yet she also stands in the gap and claims the Divinity of Jesus, who himself is so worn out by his own humanity.



The woman in this story teaches Jesus about himself: something he might not wish to recognize, but something that will transform his entire ministry. She shows him that even when his task seems to be too big; even when he is worn out; even when his focus is elsewhere, that God's power within him is abundant and life-giving. There is more than enough grace, more than enough love, more than enough hope, more than enough power for everyone. She tells Jesus her story, and places herself in Jesus' story, claiming the ability for Christ, in his hearing, to transform her story and restore her daughter's life.

As we gather this Rally Day Sunday for a season of new beginnings in the life of our church, I pray that we gather with the faith and hope and love of the unnamed woman in our text for today. I pray that we approach Jesus with boldness and a longing to be transformed.

I pray, too, that we come here today mindful that we too, like everyone else, even Jesus, have something to learn. I pray that on this Rally Day Sunday we will renew our commitment:

- to learning more about the love of a God who saves,
- to learning more about our world and all its dividing lines and human need
- to stepping out in faith that we—and our world—might be renewed.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Gill, Michael Gates. *How Starbucks Saved My Life*. (New York City: Gotham Books), 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Taylor, Barbara Brown; *The Seeds of Heaven*. p 63.

<sup>3</sup> Wiesel, Elie. In *What Does It Mean to be Human?* Compiled and Edited by Frederick Frank, Janis Roze, and Richard Connolly. p 21-22.

<sup>4</sup> Fred Rogers in *This American Life*. <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/184/transcript>

