

As most of you are pretty well aware of by now, you know that I come from a long line of sports enthusiasts who are nothing if not fiercely loyal when it comes to our teams. At my grandpa's funeral, our pastor worked in his love of the Detroit Tigers into the sermon because she knew that was at the core of his identity. I grew up on the baseball diamonds of the various leagues my dad played, and still plays, in, with him teaching me the ins and outs of the game we both love. There was a time when Jennifer, having her flight from Chicago cancelled, rented a car and drove the rest of the way home so she could make it in time to watch the Pistons in the NBA finals with me. And then...there is the deep down in our core love that all three of us have for the Detroit Red Wings. My childhood is riddled with memories of championship parades, driving to Detroit just to watch away playoff games on the big screen of the stadium, even going to open practices when we could, and do not get me started on the ridiculous rituals and superstitions Kristin and I had to make sure we were watching the games in such a way that gave us the best chance at winning. Like I said, fiercely loyal, but as with anything...there were times when that loyalty was tested.

As I stand here knowing that tonight the Lions kick off their Super Bowl contender season, I remember slogging through the 0-16 season wondering if it was worth it. The 100 loss seasons, too many to count, that I

endured from the Tigers. The shameful Michigan season that started with a loss to Appalachian State. All of them bringing the question, do I change my allegiances? And this happens with certain players too. Take for example, the Red Wings; one of their biggest rivals are the Chicago Blackhawks. Only five hours apart, Original Six competitors, used to be in the same division, constantly battling for playoff contention. You became engrained with a deep seated hatred for their players, wanting nothing to do with them. And then...the inevitable happened. Much like when Brett Favre starting playing for the Vikings or Terrell Owens went from the Eagles to the Cowboys, or any number of Red Sox players who went to the Yankees, there came the day when Chris Chelios, vaunted Blackhawks defensemen, signed with the Wings. We were furious. How are we supposed to cheer for this guy? How are we supposed to think of him as one of *ours*? Was he really going to be included in our fanaticism? Well...if you ask any of us now we will tell you, we love us some Chelly and sometimes, you just have to let your mind be changed by the circumstances you find yourself in, even if you weren't planning on it.

If I've said it once, I've said it a dozen times, this is my least favorite gospel and yet it always crops up in the lectionary. It's bad enough to have Jesus spitting on his fingers and touching this guy's ears and tongue, but to

also have him being mean and disrespectful to this woman who just wants her daughter to be healed, but also has the audacity of being a Gentile. The whole scene is wildly uncomfortable, and so the easier path would be to dismiss it, or explain it away. We could wonder if Jesus is just testing this woman's faith, but that's not really Jesus' style in Mark, nor does he make any comment on her faith when he sends her away. This conversation doesn't end like it does with the hemorrhaging woman, your faith has made you well, go in peace, but with a short dismissal, you may go. So this doesn't seem to be a test. We also talked in Bible study about how Jesus seems to be wanting some down time, away from the demands of the crowds and the people, and so maybe he's exhausted and who hasn't said something they regret when they're tired and running on empty? But even that...we rarely see this from Jesus even when he's tired, even when he's seeking solitude. Rarely do we hear demeaning, harsh words from Jesus, at least not towards another person, a fig tree maybe, but a fellow child of God? It doesn't happen often...

There's part of me that when I read this almost wants to roll my eyes at Jesus because frankly what exactly does he expect? Mark tells us that Jesus went away to the region of Tyre, and this is not a throwaway biblical GPS detail. Tyre is a good 40 miles northwest of Nazareth, so Jesus is well

beyond the bounds of Galilee. He is right along the borders of Phoenicia and Syria, which are, you guessed it, Gentile territories!! So what exactly is Jesus expecting to happen when he goes into these areas? And again, sure, maybe he expects some peace and quiet, but his reputation has spread far beyond what he could imagine and so when he rolls into town it's going to garner some notice and that notice doesn't come with religious boundaries attached to it.

Like so many people before her, the Syrophenician woman approaches Jesus not for herself, but on behalf of her daughter who is ravaged by an unclean spirit. We've seen this story before, a grieving, desperate parent asked Jesus to spare their child, and usually Jesus assents. Not in this instance though. In this instance, his lifetime of being surrounded by prejudice and unflattering language about the other, comes flying out. He tells her in no uncertain terms that he isn't there for her and her kind. He likens her to a dog and says that those seated at the table, i.e. the Israelites need to be fed first, and it would be wrong to throw food from the table to the dogs scabbling on the floor begging. It's rude, it's demeaning, it is deeply offensive. If I were this woman, I think I would have been flooded with shame and made a hard exit, hoping I didn't start to cry until I was out of ear shot, but thankfully this woman is a bit stronger

than I am. She looks at Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who has the fate of her daughter in his hands, and she tells him that he's wrong.

Even us lowly dogs get the crumbs off the table. In short, we mean something too, even if you would choose to ignore us. We matter. All of us matter. Gentile or Jew. We all are deserving of care, respect, and healing.

This blessed woman is bold, brash, and world-changing. Frankly, in many ways, she is the reason we are here. She is asking Jesus to adjust his loyalties, rethink what he has always known, and dare to see the world through a new, more inclusive lens. This woman dares to ask the Messiah to change. She dares to ask us to confront the idea that Jesus made a mistake and got some things wrong, necessitating a radical shift in his point of view. From this point on, Jesus' message isn't just geared towards the Israelites, towards the traditional "in-crowd." From this point on, Jesus begins traveling more and more into Gentile regions, sharing a message that he is, in fact, there for all of creation, not just some. This woman dared to ask Jesus to tear down the boundaries of God's love and he did...and in a lot of ways, she dares to ask us to do the same thing.

So much of the world we have created, particularly as a church, is based off of an assumption about who the Bible says we should or should not include. Often times we put those words into Jesus' mouth as well,

making our prejudices and biases, quite literally, the word of the Lord. We adamantly stand by the fact that if things have always been this way, then they have always been this way for a reason. And yet, here we have literal gospel proof that even Jesus had to confront his own assumptions and prejudices and change his mind, break open the barriers society had put up in his mind, and rethink what exactly it meant that he had come to save God's children. Not just some, but all.

And the thing is...we have done this over and over again as a church and yet, we still think that some barriers need to be upheld. Until 1832, African Americans were allowed to be ordained in the Lutheran Church. Jehu Jones Jr., changed that. Until 1970, women weren't allowed to be ordained in the Lutheran church. Elizabeth Platz changed that. Until 1979, African American women weren't ordained in the Lutheran church. Earlean Miller changed that. Until 2009, LGBTQIA+ folk weren't ordained, more than we can name changed that. Until 2023, there were no ordained Palestinian women in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jerusalem and the Holy Land. Sally Azar changed that, and then told our kids about it at NYG. So often we forget, or willfully ignore, the fact that the church has aimed to always be in the business of breaking down barriers and boundaries to make God's grace more readily accessible to all. And yet, there are still people

that will fight and argue that LGBTQIA+ folks shouldn't be welcome in our pews, that they are condemned. There are still people who are deeply influenced by the systemic racism of this country that they think African Americans need to stay in their lane and their communities. I can tell you first hand there are still people who think I shouldn't be standing in this pulpit. And yet, Jesus shows us...things can change. We need to be people who are in the business of letting our hearts and minds be changed for the sake of God's grace being more rampant in the world.

We all have that person, that group that sits in our hearts and we think yeah we would tell them that the table is not set for them. None of us are immune to the human nature of that, and yet, we are not, the church is *not* immune to change and radical acceptance, even if some would have us believe we should be. If Jesus can change, so can we. The kingdom of God is not for our policing. The kingdom of God doesn't employ us as bouncers of who is in and who is out. The kingdom of God is for all of God's children, *all of them*. If this woman hadn't dared to challenge Jesus, who knows if we would even be here. We must dare to ask who is being kept out because we're too attached to our boundaries and our fears. We must dare to ask how we can share the meal of our table. We must dare to ask who needs to be welcomed on behalf of a God who loves us all. **AMEN!!!**