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THE GOOD NEWS:
**The Truth That Knows
No Bounds**

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A lion's roar is the loudest of all the cats. Able to be heard up to five miles away, a lion unnerves everything with its presence.

The early Christians depicted the gospels with icons. Even though the Gospel of Mark opens quite simply with, "the good news of Jesus Christ," it roars, as his life unsettles everything in the first century. The abrupt and insistent messages of this gospel sent the good news far beyond the confines of the small area traversed by Jesus.

This slim gospel inspired people to dismantle the Roman Empire and build a faith crossing nationalities and eras. The early Christians chose a lion to represent this gospel.

For the next two months, we will hear those stories. Time has not dulled the gospel's sharp edges or Jesus' words of grace. They will provoke us to wonder what his good news calls us to do now.

A few textual notes about Mark and today's reading.

The entry level New Testament class at University of Chicago begins not with a prerequisite Greek language or Hebrew Bible competency.

To study the gospels requires knowledge of geography. I sat at the kitchen counter flipping old fashioned flash cards to pass the entrance quiz to locate the names of first century nations, cities, and rivers.

We read the Gospel of Mark along with a map, noting the places Jesus travels, the people he tends, and the number of people he serves. The writer of Mark layers the stories with meaning from the mere mention of a location. Jesus literally zig-zags across the Sea of Galilee into lands far from Nazareth and Capernaum. He knits together people once separated.

Today's lectionary reading follows a blowup between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders about holiness rituals. In short summary, Jesus confounds them by saying it's not what they consume that keeps them holy, it's what they do that creates goodness.

As if to demonstrate the answer, Jesus turns and heads deep into Gentile territory...

Dear God,

*With all the arguments and debates about what's good for us
and who we should listen to,*

we come to hear your story of good news.

*Silence all the noise that distracts us and
startle us with your son's truth*

so that we become faithful to him and him alone. Amen.

Mark 7:24-37

²⁴ From there Jesus 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 Jesus could not escape notice, ²⁵ and a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet.

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²⁶ Now the woman was a gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.

²⁷ Jesus 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.”

²⁸ But she answered him, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” ²⁹ Then he said to her, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.” ³⁰ And when she went home, she found her child lying on the bed and the demon gone.

³¹ Then Jesus returned from the region of Tyre and went by way of Sidon toward the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. ³² They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech, and they begged him to lay his hand on him.

³³ Jesus took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. ³⁴ Then looking up to heaven, Jesus sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” ³⁵ And the man’s ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.

³⁶ Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one, but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. ³⁷ They were astounded beyond measure, saying, “Jesus has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.”

Jesus calls them dogs. He refers to a desperate mother and her suffering child as dogs.

No amount of twisting in translating the original text can soften the slur. Dogs were not pets. They were mangy scavengers and strays.

The Syrophoenicians are of Canaanite origin, this ethnic group of people were considered enemies to the Jews and eternal outsiders to the faith of Israel.

And it is a Syrophoenician *woman* who accosts him. A woman. Regardless of her ethnic or religious identity, in that era, it is never appropriate for a woman to demand anything from any man.

Jesus ignores her at first.

Insistent, she throws herself before him, pleading a second time.

Jesus attempts to shut her down by saying, “You don’t give the children’s bread” meaning the children of Israel, “to dogs like her.” He rejects her, implying his grace is for a select few.

Is this a knee-jerk reaction? To fall back on the playground-like taunts he might have heard as a youth? Again, be clear: He isn’t testing her faith. He’s likely irritated to have his alone-time disturbed.

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We expect Jesus to offer his customary empathy and miracle. Instead, he behaves as if he is above Canaanite mongrels.

She persists, “Even dogs get crumbs,” and dismisses all ethnic and religious divides.

Imagine their pin-drop silence. Alone. Just the two of them. This mother’s gaze before is cast at his feet. Now she stares directly into Jesus’s eyes. “Even dogs get crumbs. Are we less than dogs to you?” Like any parent with a critically ill child, she persists: “Heal my daughter.”

Is this the kind of story to bring to Celebration Sunday when we gather with full choir and brass to praise Jesus? What kind of good news is this? What about some other lectionary reading that describes faith as a comforting balm.

The only reason our faith matters, the only reason this church matters, is because the good news shapes us with a truth to withstand any and everything in life that is dangerous and divisive and uncomfortable.

Outside of these sanctuary walls, today’s rhetoric of despair and fear with all the attempts to divide neighbor from neighbor, belittle outsiders or label human beings as not worthy, flies in the face of the long history of being a follower of Christ.

Comfort – true peace – comes from trusting in God – the one who creates, sustains, and redeems all of creation in a mystery of love.

The good news of Christ Jesus is good news primarily because it opens us to the possibilities in our lives, particularly when its uncomfortable.

Some theorize that Jesus antagonizes her with a slur to dramatize long-standing racism. That's one school of thought. He brings it to center stage precisely to overturn such prejudices for his followers back then and to teach us to do the same today.

Imagine, Jesus, perhaps with a satirical gleam in his eye and with a tone of voice, "But isn't it true that we shouldn't give the children's food to the dogs?" (Wink, wink.) "Isn't that what everyone says? What do you say?"

She takes the bait and turns the metaphor on its head: She proclaims God's grace is for all people, right here and right now. Jesus immediately concedes.

My personal read is that it is a stretch for the way the Gospel of Mark portrays Jesus.

Another way to interpret this story is that Jesus was bound by the conventional and divisive attitudes of his day. According to this approach, Jesus changes his mind. She forces him to change his mind about her and his mission.

One could argue this fits with the Old Testament tradition of the instances that God's mind changes when Abraham, Hagar, or Moses insist. Like those faith exemplars, this Syrophenician woman takes her place in that ancient lineage

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of those who struggle with God. She argues from the point of love.

Maybe this is it since, this is the only verbal fencing match in Mark's gospel that Jesus doesn't win. This approach demonstrates that every human being, including Jesus, learns and evolves.

Some find this an abhorrent interpretation. I've heard clergy women of color insist they'd rather turn in their collar than accept Jesus was a sexist and a racist.

What do you think? In our Reformed tradition, it's not about what I think or the scholars, but what the spirit inspires us to believe as we read this text today, and then do.

Perhaps the writer of Mark leaves it so raw to prod us to wrestle with the story centuries later, so that this story reads us.

Perhaps that's the genius of Mark's gospel. The writer lets us squirm. Maybe this gospel writer shows us the danger of knee jerk reactions. Maybe the gospel writer pleads for this good news to break apart any barriers that confine us.

When we get so caught up in our notions of who's right, who's saved, who's not worthy it takes a persistence of a beloved child of God to open our hearts and change our minds.

If we stand around debating if Jesus changes his mind or not – that merely becomes a delay mechanism if we fail to see in ourselves in this story as Jesus’ body today, his church.

And we, as Jesus’ body today, must be willing to hear the pleas of those whom we’d call “dogs” in private and instead to see them as God’s beloved.

We don’t like to change our minds. It requires such vulnerability.

People who change their minds undergo the anxiety of being wrong, swallowing their pride, or perhaps being cast out themselves. People who can change their minds are under no illusion of being perfect. Humbled and teachable, they’re more likely to be merciful. And for Jesus there’s no other bottom line.

Here is another way to accept this story – we don’t get to snip it out of the gospel – it does not matter what is the mind of Christ or even our own – what matters is what we do.

Regardless of why or the tone of Jesus’ voice or his intent – this story marks the crucial pivot in the good news when Jesus heals those long denied.

He heals a woman’s daughter. He heals a man to hear and to speak the good news. Whenever Jesus heals, he heals a person as well as the fractured community. Grace comes one person at a time for the benefit of all people.

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One of the most alarming things about the good news is that it will not be contained, not by the first century, not by the prejudices of Jesus' own time or even his own mind, not by the grave, not by our assumptions, and certainly not by the confines of our minds.

We must be willing to be healed of our small thinking. We, as his body today, must be willing to cross divides and boundaries. Be uncomfortable with the pursuit of creating lasting change.

Who is your Syrophenician woman?

Is it a mother pleading with us to do what is necessary to stop the spiraling gun violence? Is it an immigrant crossing rivers whom we open our eyes to see as a beloved child of God? Those in need of medical care, food, access to mental health. You can complete the list of ways God's children suffer.

Flip the coin, how are you a Syrophenician woman? What are you pleading for the church to be, to do, to become?

These are issues of the day that grieve God's heart.

Receptivity to all of God's children, a willingness to consider new ideas, and to change our minds requires leaving behind old comforts. Only then do we become the agents for this good news to continue to expand across time and place.

Celebration Sunday calls us to this ministry.

Let the good news disrupt your comfort. Let the good news open you to be healed of whatever keeps you from fully participating in this community as God created you to be. Let the good news compel you to embrace through listening and speaking with those outside of your comfort zone.

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