

WORD AGAINST WORDS
MARK 7:24-30
FOR WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN, GREENVILLE SC
2 AUGUST 2020 (PANDEMIC)

*Our New Testament lesson comes from the Gospel of Mark, chapter 7, verses 24-30.
Listen again for the word of God:*

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

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

If you've heard me preach before you know the pattern:
pithy story set in childhood,
a bit on the Bible,
return to pithy story,
connect it to the Bible,
speed up, slow down, say Amen.

Dave Sems, a former pastor of this church, told me that when I preached he never quite knew where I was going till I got there. Sometimes even then he didn't know.

But y'all, today I want you to know exactly where I'm going. So I'm going to tell you my central thesis. Then you can go make your coffee, wait for the hymn. Or you can stick around. Hopefully the getting there, the trouble it takes, will be worth something too.

Here's the thesis: a righteous word spoken can change the world, even when spoken against the Word of God.

And, just for fun, here's how I'm making the argument. It hinges on a word. In Mark 7 a Gentile woman asks Jesus, the *Word before the world*, to heal her daughter. He throws an insult at the request, a shocking, degrading insult. Following the logic of a metaphor about bread, Jesus calls the woman's child a dog. And whether you were called a dog in 1st century Palestine or called a dog while walking down Augusta Rd. yesterday, the message is the same. But this "dog" yips back, she uses his word against him, and Jesus changes his mind. In fact, because of her prophetic word, he expands his mission.

Says the Word of God, and this is my translation, "because of your word, you go — the demon has left your daughter." That's the crux. Not her faith, but her word. It changes things, it changes Jesus.

As many of y'all know, I'm an only child, a curious, precocious, blame-it-on-the-cat type child. And I found myself in trouble just about as soon as I found my words. In classrooms I was chronically incapable of raising my hand but that did not stop me from opening my mouth. I would answer almost every question unprompted. It was not that I knew the answers, mind you, I simply assumed I'd get there during my monologuing or at the very least that I'd exhaust everyone into thinking I got there. I deployed words to fill silence, and, if I'm being honest, to hear myself talk.

One day in about third grade, a cross-stitch appeared above my bed. It somehow migrated from our guest room. In the cross-stitch were two Elizabethian fools with motley costuming: all color and diamonds and tri-corner hats. Between the two fools, right at eye-line when you walked in my room, was a saying:

Better to remain silent and appear a fool than to speak and remove all doubt.

In retrospect it seems a rather pointed jab, but I absorbed it without taking it personally. It was a good idea ... for someone else.

In the meantime, and I'm sure y'all can't imagine it, I talked and talked and talked. And I spent a childhood...an adolescence...an early-adulthood in trouble.

Inconsequential trouble.

Meaningless trouble.

Selfish trouble.

I've been thinking a lot about John Lewis recently. Representative John Lewis, who died on July 17th, was the moral voice of our nation: a hero of the modern civil rights movement in America, chosen by Dr. King to speak on behalf of the Black youth of America, Lewis marched and was bloodied at Selma, spoke truth to power on the steps of the Lincoln memorial, and persisted in truth-telling despite white apathy, police brutality, and the overwhelming odds against him.

Yet he never lost hope. As recently as 2018 he reminded us of the perpetual struggle of faithfulness: "Do not get lost in a sea of despair" he tweeted. "Be hopeful, be optimistic. Our struggle is not the struggle of a day, a week, a month, or a year, it is the struggle of a lifetime. Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble."

His words have lingered at the forefront of my thinking these past few days. Not only because I see our nation tossed in a "sea of despair," but because I like the idea of "necessary trouble." I like the contradiction of it, the challenge and tension between "good" or "necessary" and "trouble."

Good trouble, Lewis seems to suggest, troubles the waters of despair. Good trouble breathes hope. Good trouble changes the world

"Our struggle is not the struggle of a day, a week, a month, or a year, it is the struggle of a lifetime. Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble."

I made noise. I made trouble. But to what end?

As I read Mark 7, our text for today, I couldn't get my mind from John Lewis, troublemaker extraordinaire. Perhaps that's because the woman at the center of this text reminds me of him. Greek by culture, Syrochenean by nationality. In every way Jesus' opposite.

Nevertheless, by her speech she made trouble for God. With just one line — one of two lines, by the way, given to women in the entire Gospel — she disrupts the order of things, brings faith's implications to lived reality.

By the time we meet Jesus in chapter seven, he is exhausted. Crowds press him from every side, hoping for healing, bread, blessing. He has taught and prayed and preached.

Meanwhile he is pursued by Temple and State. At the end of his patience, he retreats to the northernmost region in the territory, the wealthy cosmopolitan city of Tyre. Tyre was a Gentile city, represented historically and Scripturally as a natural enemy of parochial Jews. T disciples did not follow him.

Even then he could not escape notice. Alone in a borrowed home, Jesus is approached by a woman. She violates every standard of decorum in her approach. Desperation has driven her to the margins of acceptability. Her child is sick.

Imagine the scene. You know what desperation looks like. In city streets and in hospital beds across America, its cry has confronted us in these months. It shakes us, disturbs us.

She asks that Jesus save her daughter. Perhaps you know what that feels like too. Betting against all odds, hoping against hope. She throws her need at the Word of God. She *begs*, she bows down before him in a posture of supplicant concession. *My child is sick!*

This is Jesus' moment to shine. He's done it before.

But a strange thing happens. He doesn't ask about the demon, he doesn't ask about the daughter. He hurls an insult (and this is my translation, more literal than the NRSV): "Let the children be fed first," Jesus responds, "for it is not good to throw the bread of the children to the dogs." Confronted by need he pivots to dogs.

It is shocking. It's as if, in talking about bread and children Jesus is talking about something else.

She picked up the insult. And with the force of gospel she hurled it back.

"Lord," she says — again my literal translation, the NRSV prefers "Sir," but she is in fact the only character in the Gospel to address Jesus directly as "Kyrie" — "Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." She absorbs Jesus' language, accepts it, and turns it on its head. Sure sure, the children can be given the plate, but in my household when the children are fed so too are the dogs.

She asked for a healing. Jesus gave her a terse, cruel "not yet." But she would not cede her ground.

For context, by the way, we are just about at the halfway point of the Gospel. In chapter six Jesus miraculously feeds 5,000 Jews. Despite the fact that there was almost no bread to begin with, by the end of the episode 12 baskets of loaves and fish remain. Twelve, the number of tribes of Israel, gathered and complete. After the feeding, immediately preceding this story, Jesus finds himself in conflict with the leaders of the religious community. He — rather shockingly for a Rabbi — declares all foods ritually clean, suggesting instead that it is what is in our hearts that can defile us.

Then there's chapter eight. Just after the confrontation with the woman Jesus finds himself in the middle of another miraculous feeding. This time it's Gentiles, men *and* women. This is a pivot in Jesus' trajectory. Before the encounter with the woman we saw Jesus' mission primarily to the Jews. After her we meet the nations. And though again the provisions are meager, by the time Jesus has done his work seven baskets remain and all have been fed. Seven, a number in Scripture that suggests unity, wholeness, totality.

What happened between the meal for the Jews and the meal for the nations?

A Greek woman got up to trouble.

Her word expanded his world. This isn't just about bread, and it isn't about healing. It's about fullness, spiritual fullness. It's about healing and totality. It's about the needs of people, men and women, Gentile and Jew, Greek, Roman, Syrophonecian *right now*.

The unnamed woman made good trouble. Necessary trouble. She confronted Jesus with implications of his own gospel, and in so doing she threw open the doors. No longer just one group, after her a place is set at God's table for any who might come.

To be clear, Jesus knew that the Gospel was for all the nations, that his message would extend beyond Israel. He simply believed that it was not yet her time, that his mission was still primarily to Israel, the children of the covenant, not the dogs that scavenged outside.

The Syrophonecian woman changes that. She confronts Jesus with the lived implications of his own teaching. She calls the question.

And he concedes.

Better to remain silent and appear a fool than to speak and remove all doubt.

Maybe. But here's the thing: speech in the pursuit of righteousness, even where it risks foolishness, is more faithful than right-thinking silence.

"Logos," translated primarily as "saying" in Mark means, literally "word." For Mark "Logos" is all about *the good news*, the gospel. So when Mark has Jesus tell this woman that her "logos," her word, her good news, has called down his mercy, we should perk up.

She speaks the gospel to the Word of God. And because of her word her daughter is healed. Not too long after that 4,000 Gentiles are fed. Turns out the scraps that fall from the table are plenty enough.

She demanded a place around the table.. Not in some far-off idealized future, but in that moment. And she got it.

Good trouble. Necessary. She spoke up, issued a gospel word. And the world changed.

It's enough to make you want to speak up. But then, just when I'm ginning up the courage to speak, I remember the cross-stitch and I look outside. There's plenty of noise in our world today, plenty of words. The 24-hour news cycle thunders, Twitter yells, Facebook is an echo-chamber. Persistent chatter, deceitful speech, fear-mongering, PR, revisionist history.

It's enough to make you want to shut up.

Shut down.

Turn it all off.

Better to remain silent and appear a fool than to speak and remove all doubt.

What can people of good intention say today? What good do we have to offer? Surely a word is needed, but from us? Despair seeps in, and it locks up our jaw.

But then there's the woman.

And her trouble.

Not like mine. Not only for her. Not only for the making.

Hers is good trouble.

Necessary trouble.

Urgent trouble.

I remember John Lewis too, at the March on Washington, “Wake up, America, wake up!’ For we cannot stop, and we will not be patient.” I remember the crumbs of hope falling from tables *even now*.

Despairing for the world, I remember the Gospel, itself a bit of Good Trouble. The words that even the Word had to be reminded of: *there is enough to go around and the time is now!*

The Good News, the word, no matter by whom it is spoken, confronts us with its urgency and its bounty. It troubles us, as it should; it calls us to account — to account for what we have done and left undone, to account for that which defiles us in our hearts, to account for our apathy and inaction. It makes Good Trouble in our lives so that we can make Good Trouble in our world.

The word calls us not only to belief but to speech and action. It demands we doggedly carry the implications of the Word-become-flesh to our flesh and blood siblings here and now; it reminds us that the bread we hoard is not ours alone. It was given to us by God and it belongs also to those who fight for recognition, who cry out for dignity, who have been overlooked and ignored by systems and individuals — those who bear the image of God same as we do and ask only for the piece that God means for them too.

We have been given more than enough. The messianic crumbs fill our tables, expand our bellies, and now it is ours to release our grasp and pass our bread along. It is ours to speak the good news we have against the world, against the status quo, against the way things are.

Anywhere there is injustice, any fence that separates the world from the table, any whiff of racism, inequity, white superiority that lingers in our lives, in our church, or on our culture, precisely in those places we are confronted with the exterior of our faith, the implication of the words of welcome we profess each week, the lived reality of our cerebral believing.

Will we close our doors, shut out the world?

Or will we set the table?

Will we remain silent and appear a fool while the world cries out for hope?

Or will we speak?

The woman's daughter is not healed because she gets the theology quiz right. The daughter isn't healed because her mother is polite, ran it up the channels, had the contacts, made the connection. She is healed because of the audacity of her speech, the *shocking reality* that *there is enough in the Kingdom of God*. She risked her life because she saw the Truth.

But her story isn't over yet. She had to walk home.

I remember a West African proverb, which Representative Lewis claimed as his mantra:

When you pray, move your feet.

Who knows how far it was, it must have seemed miles. I imagine the moment before she opened the door to her daughter's room, a moment when anything was possible.

Maybe it was all a dream.

Maybe she had gone too far.

Maybe her daughter still bore the wounds.

Maybe a demon lurked.

Maybe it was all for nothing.

But maybe,
by her word,
by her audacity,
by her faithful going,
her tenacious demand,
her lived theology,
by the Word of God in front of her,
and the words in her mouth,
her daughter had been made well.

That is my prayer for you, for me, for us, during this time, this threshold of endless possibility. Get in trouble. Not the kind I'm known for. Not selfish trouble, not meaningless trouble.

Not chatter, not chaos. Get in gospel trouble. Be tenacious, look foolish.

Stand up, walk in faith, act up. And my goodness, like your mama said, as the woman did, *use your words*.