



**"More Ready Than You Realize"**

**Rev. Dr. Scott Field**

**Mark 7: 24-30**

**September 9, 2018**

**10:00 AM Service**

## **Who would have guessed a salesperson would want to know about church?**

Last Monday was Labor Day.

I presume you noticed that retailers were attempting to get our attention with Labor Day Sales. Cars. Electronics. Mattresses. (When are mattresses NOT on sale?)

Lynda and I received a direct mail card about a furniture sale. It was from a store where we had purchased some furniture in the spring. And, as it turned out, I was interested in finding a lateral file cabinet -- something that didn't look too much like the office filing cabinet I'd find at Staples. Since we were headed to the hospital in Aurora to see Lynda's mom and could go right past this particular store, we thought we'd stop to see what they had "on sale".

We met up with the salesperson whom we had seen before. Honestly, we have enjoyed getting to know her. She is from another country, has twin boys, and lives in St. Charles. She's also been very helpful with some suggestions about settling into the home we purchased last winter. As you might guess, we did indeed find a filing cabinet that could be ordered from another store and we did get a "sale price" which, I think, actually means they got what they wanted and we don't feel so bad about it.

I'm glad about the file cabinet because, well, because I'm about to sign up for Medicare and for some reason I think there will be -- over time -- a massive amount of paperwork involved. Where am I going to put all of the papers?

What really caught our attention, however, was a question from the salesperson. It wasn't about the style or color or size of the cabinet we were looking for. She asked, "What church do you go to?" As it turns out, she is a Jordanian Christian but has not found a church that "fits" here in the U.S. And what prompted her question is you -- the people of First Church.

How did a salesperson in St. Charles ask about First Church? Well, Lynda had told someone here about working with this salesperson and recommended her to a First-Church-er. That First Church-er also worked with her and, because it was a good experience, also recommended her to another First Church-er. And that First-Church-er also worked with this particular salesperson.

So, you see what is happening? Though we are First Church there are three people involved already: Lynda, a friend, and another friend. And a salesperson at a furniture store. And that is what brought the question from the salesperson to us: "What church do you go to?"

We told her it is a Methodist Church in Crystal Lake -- which is actually too much of a commute for church going if you live in St. Charles. She said, "I've never heard of a Methodist Church, but if the people there are like the people I've met, then I'd like to be part of a church like that."

Bam!

Not a promotional campaign. Not a whizz bang youth group. Not a star-studded music program. Not a spell-binding preacher. But people that she thought she'd like to be with ...somehow connected to God.

Who would have guessed, right?

People are readier than most of us realize to respond to the nudging of God in their lives.

The Scriptures have so many examples of the unexpected readiness of people to take a step of faith. Here's one of those examples, an encounter between Jesus and a woman.

Apparently, Jesus himself was surprised by this.

Listen in to an encounter between Jesus and an unexpected, but intensely interested person.

*<sup>24</sup> Then Jesus left Galilee and went north to the region of Tyre. He didn't want anyone to know which house he was staying in, but he couldn't keep it a secret. <sup>25</sup> Right away a woman who had heard about him came and fell at his feet. Her little girl was possessed by an evil spirit, <sup>26</sup> and she begged him to cast out the demon from her daughter.*

*Since she was a Gentile, born in Syrian Phoenicia, <sup>27</sup> Jesus told her, "First I should feed the children—my own family, the Jews. It isn't right to take food from the children and throw it to the dogs."*

*<sup>28</sup> She replied, "That's true, Lord, but even the dogs under the table are allowed to eat the scraps from the children's plates."*

*<sup>29</sup> "Good answer!" he said. "Now go home, for the demon has left your daughter."<sup>30</sup> And when she arrived home, she found her little girl lying quietly in bed, and the demon was gone.*

For centuries this account of Jesus and the desperate mother seeking help for her daughter has confounded many. We could spend a great deal of time digging into the details here. I am going to skip over matters of evil spirits, exorcism of demons, and the like. I want to focus on four surprises in this encounter between Jesus and the woman from the city of Tyre.

As a background for a moment, to grasp something of the social distance described here, the Scripture account tells us that the woman in this story is a Greek, that is, a person who is not Jewish and wouldn't have much interest in a Messiah promised to the Jews. In fact, the description is even more precise: she is a Syrophenician from the region of Tyre, on the Mediterranean coast. Tyre is a city that our Old Testament describes as the wealthy and godless oppressor of Israel (see Is. 23, Jeremiah 47:4; Ezekiel 26-28; Joel 3:4; Amos 1:9; Zechariah 9:2). Josephus, a first century Jewish historian, expresses the white-hot hostility between Jews and the Syrophenicians, when he says, "they are our bitterest enemies." This woman is not just a Gentile, that is, a non-Jew. She is part of a particularly resented group of privileged, wealthy, and powerful enemies.

And here we find the four surprises:

### **1. We wouldn't expect the woman to come to Jesus in the first place.**

The word on the street about people from Tyre is that they are wealthy, arrogant, powerful,

and treat Jews like dirt. As one person put it, this encounter between the woman and Jesus would be like a Hindu Brahmin,

the highest and most prestigious of the four social classes in traditional Hindu understanding...as if a Hindu Brahmin woman pulled up in her chauffeur-driven Bentley in front of Mother Teresa's home for the dying in Calcutta and asked for help. Completely unexpected. This is a sterling example of the need within each person, whatever social position, accessibility of resources, influence and power, whomever it is everywhere and always, for connecting with God. It demonstrates the well-known observation of St. Augustine in the fourth century that each person is restless until we find our rest in Christ. We want to know who made us, why we are here, and where we are going at the time of our death. These are not questions for only certain people, but for all people. But who would have expected a well-resourced woman from Tyre to come seek out an itinerant Jewish teacher and miracle-worker when her daughter was deeply disturbed by an evil spirit?

Right from the start, this encounter challenges us not to set limits on the reach of the good news of God's Kingdom, not to presume people are not seeking the Lord, not holding a glimmer of faith, not in need because they seem to be uninterested. The power of the gospel is not limited to the narrow concerns of those within the church on Sunday morning; it is for everyone we meet all the time and everywhere.

## **2. We wouldn't expect Jesus to reply in such a gruff and dismissive manner.**

She begs Jesus for help. His response startles us. He says she'll have to get in line. The gospel, with all its blessing and power and promise, comes first to the Jewish people. They were chosen by God as the community through which the Savior of the world would come. So, they get the first crack at salvation. Non-Jews will have to wait. Of course, Jesus doesn't use language like that. He used a metaphor of children at the table and dogs begging for food. He says the children must first be fed; who would take their food away and give it to the dogs?

Pastors and commentators have attempted all sorts of interpretive gymnastics to make it sound like Jesus didn't say what he said, but I think it is best to leave the startling response just as it is. Jesus, it seems, was sometimes surprised by the faith of people whom you would expect didn't have any faith to begin with. The Roman centurion comes to mind, along with Zacchaeus, the supervisor of tax collection in the region, or people like Nicodemus who were part of the council in Jerusalem seeking to put an end to Jesus. People are apparently much more ready than we realize to welcome God's good news.

## **3. We wouldn't expect this woman to put up with such a response.**

The third surprise is that this desperate mother refuses to take "no" for an answer. When we think of "how people come to faith" or "how people become followers of Jesus", we've come to think of it as a consumer transaction. You have to be nice to me. You can't say anything that would remotely offend me. You have to be sensitive that I might dash off like a scared rabbit at a moment's notice. This precious woman demonstrates an important companion of developing faith: humility. The Scripture account tells us that she fell at Jesus' feet and begged for the demon to be exorcised from her daughter. She had come to the conclusion that all of her wealth or influence or access to resources was actually inadequate for the need. She would defer to Jesus. She called him, "Lord", meaning the person in authority.

That being said, however, she engaged Jesus. The disciples, the official group of twelve, often seem to be clueless when Jesus is teaching, particularly when he used figures of speech or parables. This woman was very quick to pick up the point about the children eating first and the

dogs under the table. True enough, she agreed, the children should not have their food taken away in order to feed the dogs. But why can't the children get their meal and the dogs get some table scraps at the same time. Isn't it true that the kids sometimes sneak a scrap or two to the puppy at their feet under the table? She knows that she is unworthy, but that does not keep her from believing that she and her daughter are worth healing. She didn't let pride or offense get in the way.

"Pride changed angels into devils, Augustine said, and Satan uses pride as a favorite device for separating us from God and from God's help. Pride stiffens our knees so that they will not bow down and muzzles our voice so that we do not call out in humble faith."

David Garland, *The NIV Application Commentary*, *loc.cit.*, p. 297

#### **4. We wouldn't expect things to end this way.**

The fourth surprise belongs to Jesus. I don't think he expected the faith that brought her to him for help in the first place and would not let him go without his positive response. I like the way Eugene Peterson renders this portion of the Scripture:

*29-30 Jesus was impressed. "You're right! On your way! Your daughter is no longer disturbed. The demonic affliction is gone." She went home and found her daughter relaxed on the bed, the torment gone for good.*

#### **Declutter**

The faith of the Syrophenician woman in this encounter was unexpected. The account is included in the Scriptures, I think, to help us avoid that oversight in our own lives. If we have eyes to see and hearts to discern, we will find that people around us are seeking to connect with God, too.

The amazing thing is that we have the awesome possibility of being that connecting link.

We're going to need something onboard, however. We're going to need a particular way of looking at life, people, situations, and needs. The Apostle Paul put it this way, "*We no longer look at people the way the world looks at people.*" (2 Corinthians 5:16) We have an outlook of God's love for others. And we have a bias for evangelism.

The word "evangelism" isn't used in churches very often.

And "bias" is almost never understood as a positive thing. In the case of evangelism it raises all of the specters of judgmental evangelists who make us uneasy with condemning pronouncements in God's name.

Even worse, "evangelism" is an -ism. It denotes a bias in favor of one thing and against another. Most "isms," including racism, sexism, and nativism, argue for one group of people over and against another group of people – one race, sex, or ethnicity is preferred over all others. If evangelism is a similar "ism," we had best stop now before we multiply further sins in the world.

However, evangelism is not like these other "isms." Rather than promoting one group of people over another, it declares one message over all other messages. It declares that there is a supremacy to God's good news and it rejects all other forms of news as deficient. If people are seeking, we can help them find by pointing them in the direction toward Jesus. That is our bias. (Adapted from Mark Teasdale, *Evangelism for Non-Evangelists*. InterVarsity Press, 2016, p.5)

God has done something on behalf of us all and we don't want anybody left out. The connecting link is often engaging the question someone else may be asking by revealing something about our own connection with Jesus.

Last weekend Lynda and I spent a lot of time at the Rush Copley Medical Center in Aurora concerning the fall Lynda's mother had taken, the resulting broken hip, and the day-long wait for hip replacement surgery. She is doing wonderfully well, by the way. As you might imagine, while I was sitting in the room with my mother-in-law with her dozing from the pain medications and me simply dozing, there were various nurses and patient care people in and out. Late in the day, with surgery scheduled for Friday evening, a nurse named Jeannie came in. She did the expected checking of vital signs, reviewed some consent forms, answered a few questions and then asked one of her own.

"I noticed a book about evangelism here today. Is one of you reading that?"

I suddenly got fearful. Actually, I had been reading a paperback about evangelism, but not many people even use that word. Did she have a horrible experience with evangelists? Was she about to let go of some long-held venom against pushy Christians? Should I say I was doing counter-intelligence research on the annoying practices of religious people? The room had only one door and she was standing in front of it. There was no way of escape!

"I'm reading it," I said.

"Oh. Are you part of a church or something?"

"Yes. How about you?"

"My dad was a pastor. Just retired. He was recently diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. And I was married to a pastor. Turned out he was an abuser. When I finally divorced him, the church chose him and turned me out."

"Sounds like your God-card got revoked, huh?"

"Yeah. And my parents moved nearby. My dad asks me every week if I am going to church. They've found a really big church -- that's so fine for them. But it's like a big show to me."

"So, you haven't been back to church?"

"Well, I went to a little church meeting above a coffee shop in Plainfield. I'm not even sure my dad would call it a church because it didn't have ushers and hymns and all of that. They had one part of the time together where they just told what was going on in their lives. Before I knew it -- it was the first time I'd been there -- I told them about my experience, the abuse, being ignored in the church, and my divorce. Right in the middle of it I figured they were going to send me back downstairs and out the door."

"What happened?"

"Some of them hugged me. All of them welcomed me. It was amazing."

"So you go there every week?"

"No, I work a lot of Sundays"

"Work has a way of getting in the way sometimes, doesn't it?"

"Yes," she said. But I think you're here for a reason."

"Oh? What would that be?"

"I have this Sunday off -- day after tomorrow."

"So, I'm here to remind you to go back to that church on Sunday?"

"I think so."

I have no idea if Jeannie went to that church last Sunday, but I suspect she did.

I'm not in charge of her religious compliance.

I am responsible to be aware and welcome others to engage the nudging of God in their own lives.

Here's just one suggestion today that might lift someone's spirits and help them lean into God's nudge in their lives. After worship at the tailgate -- even during worship sitting together with others -- take a selfie and post it with some kind of affirmative comment on your social media. Let it loose and see where, by the grace of God, it will go. Others are readier than you realize to respond to the nudge of God within them.

And if you are here today experiencing the nudge of God, welcome! We're all in this wonderful gift of God's grace together.