



Canon Davis Memorial Church
380 Russell St. North, Sarnia, Ontario, N7T 6S6
(519) 344-9531 • <http://www.canondavis.com>

September 8, 2024— Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Officiant –Rev'd Paul Woolley – Organist – Dorothy Miller

Sermon

Today's gospel reading concerns a woman most would probably characterize as pushy, aggressive, and obnoxious. Mark tells us that Jesus "went away to the region of Tyre." Tyre was in or near present-day Lebanon, occupied mainly by Gentiles. Although he tried to keep his visit there a secret, word somehow got out, and a woman of the region came to Jesus seeking help for her daughter, who was possessed by a demon. Mark identifies her as "a Gentile of Syrophenician origin." Mark does not tell us how often she came to Jesus with her request or what she said initially, but Matthew tells us that she cried out, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David." Matthew also implies that she came to Jesus at least twice and to his disciples at least once.

Sermons on this text generally spend most of their time trying to justify Jesus' grossly insulting rebuke to this nameless woman: "Let the children first be fed, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."

Let's consider two things about this comment. First, Jesus does not need us to defend him; second, there's no way to do it, even if we want to defend Jesus. However, it's worth noting that God became incarnate not only in a person but also in a culture. Here, Jesus gives voice to two of the most fundamental prejudices of his culture: Jewish men did not speak to or allow themselves to be spoken to by women in public, and observant Jews tried to minimize their contact with Gentiles. First Corinthians 14:34 expresses the standard attitude of Jewish men toward women in public places: it says they are to be "silent."

By far, the most interesting person in this story is the nameless Gentile woman who didn't mind being pushy and who cleverly turned Jesus' insult to her advantage. There are two ways to look at her. First, let's try to see her as Jesus and the disciples must have seen her: unpleasant, annoying, and impossible to get rid of. She wouldn't take "no" for an answer. "Don't call us; we'll call you" would not have satisfied her. If you put

her on hold on a telephone and hoped she would eventually hang up, you would have been disappointed.

Now, let's try to see her more objectively. Sometimes, being pushy, aggressive, and annoying is the only way to get things done. Sometimes, in hindsight, we can see that "pushy," "aggressive," and "annoying" were just other words for "courage," "persistence," and "determination," and that is why we ought to see the woman in today's Gospel reading. She defied social conventions. In Jesus' world, women were expected to be more or less invisible and silent. Still, despite any number of spoken and unspoken cultural assumptions, the Syrophenician woman would not be quiet and persisted in seeking healing for her daughter.

Another famous "pushy" woman was the late black American woman Rosa Parks. On her way home from work in Montgomery, Alabama, one day in December of 1955, Rosa Parks boarded a bus and sat in the last seat reserved for "coloured people." When a white passenger boarded at the next stop, the bus driver demanded that Ms. Parks yield her seat to the white passenger. Parks refused and was arrested. But the simple act of refusing to give up her seat had a profound effect on history. It launched a boycott that brought Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., to international prominence, and it was the beginning of the civil rights movement that did so much to secure fundamental human rights that had long been denied to African Americans. Rosa Parks' refusal to give up her seat may have had influence far beyond her time and country.

In the waning days of the Soviet Union, reactionaries sought to reverse the democratization process by overthrowing the Soviet leader, Gorbachev. During the tense days of the attempted coup, the world watched as Moscow's mayor, Boris Yeltsin, literally stood up to tanks trying to disperse the Soviet parliament. When asked what inspired him to face down tanks, Yeltsin said Lech Walesa and Poland's Solidarity movement inspired him. When Walesa was asked what inspired him, he said he had long admired Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, civil rights campaigns. When Dr. King was asked what inspired him, he said he admired Rosa Parks's refusal to give up her seat. Did Rosa Parks' defiance of injustice possibly help bring down the Soviet Union?

It's tempting to shout "hooray" for pushy women, but being pushy is not enough. You also need to know whom to push. The Syrophenician woman went to the one person

who could command the demonic spirit to leave her daughter and restore the girl to soundness of mind: Jesus.

This story shows Jesus in the worst possible light, so why did Mark include it? Maybe it's in the Gospel to encourage us. Like the Syrophenician woman, we often come to Jesus with desperate needs: we might be out of work and need a job, someone we love is dying, or someone has just shattered our hearts. Like the nameless woman, we may pray to God day and night but find no relief. But more than likely, we pray about something once or twice and then forget about it. It's difficult to explain why God hears and answers some prayers and seems to leave others unanswered. But God expects us to persist in our prayers (maybe even a little pushy) and return repeatedly.

The final thing we should notice about the Syrophenician woman is the nature of her request. Begging Jesus to free her daughter from demonic power was no idle, off-hand petition. The woman was not asking for a trip to Cancun or a new car; she sought justice.

Thank goodness for pushy women and sometimes pushy men. Thank goodness for people who defy social conventions to right wrong. But above all, thank goodness for those who kneel at Jesus 'feet day and night and pray without ceasing. Thank goodness for women and men who seek justice and will not accept "no" for an answer – even when the "no" seems to come from God. **AMEN.**

Dear friends in Christ,

As you know, our church has always been a place of deep community, faith, and service. We have weathered many seasons together, both in times of abundance and in times of challenge. Recently, our bishop met with us, your church leaders, to discuss the reality that many churches, including ours, are facing dwindling resources and fewer members.

While this is a tough conversation, I want to be open with you about the possibility that, in order to continue thriving in our mission, we may need to join with fellow Anglican communities to worship under one roof. This isn't a loss but an opportunity for us to embrace a larger family of faith. Together, we can pool our resources and strength to continue God's work in our community.

I understand this may be difficult for some to hear, but let us remember that the Church is not the building but the people, united in Christ.

We will navigate this prayerfully, ensuring that we make decisions with love, compassion, and faith in God's plan for us.

As we move forward, I encourage you to share your thoughts, concerns, and hopes, so that we can walk this journey together."

Prayerfully,
Your Wardens