

Ordinary 23B: Mark 7:24-37

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by [Melissa Florer-Bixler](#) in the [September 2, 2015](#) issue



Crumby Dog, painting by [Ally Barrett](#)

Each Sunday evening, following the sermon, a member of our church stands before the 40 or so people gathered and makes an invitation: “Where did you sense God’s Holy Spirit among us tonight?”

When explaining the Mennonite tradition of *Zeugnis* to those outside Anabaptism, I've had to clarify that this is not an invitation to discuss the sermon's finer points or to add one's own opinions to the mix. This is the time when the gathered community—Christ's body—does the work of discerning if and how the good news has been proclaimed in and among us in singing, praying, reading scripture, and preaching.

Sometimes that answer comes in the form of a long, uncomfortable silence; at other times discernment happens through rigorous debate. Or it may be poured out in tears of sadness or confession. A few times someone has gotten up and left. Sometimes we wait for another sermon, another Sunday, and only then can we look back to see that our words failed us the previous week.

I have spent most of my Christian life in deep discomfort with Mark 7. This chapter subjects us to a disturbing picture of Jesus casting a derogatory slur at a gentile woman who comes to him for help. It is entirely out of place with the character of Jesus, the Christ of compassion and mercy. More than simple rudeness, his words reinscribe ethnic boundaries and degrade the gender of a vulnerable woman.

After a decade in the Mennonite Church, I now read Jesus' exchange with the Syrophenician woman as a kind of *Zeugnis*. "Sir," she says, "even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." But I also hear her asking, "Is this good news?"

In an act of communal discernment, Jesus relents and heals the woman's daughter. He does so in response not to her *pistis* (faith) but to her *logos* (reasoning). The Syrophenician woman has detected an inconsistency, or at least she names aloud the same troubling discomfort I sense when I read this story.

As readers, we have the benefit of looking back at the conflicting testimony to which the woman responds. At the beginning of chapter 7, Jesus finds himself defending the disciples against Pharisees who take them to task for violating "the tradition of the elders" (7:3). Jesus responds by calling these Pharisees hypocrites who "abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition" (7:8).

Turning to the crowds, Jesus articulates a reorientation of the law. It is not what goes into a person that defiles, but that which comes out. The traditions set up to protect the law, the ceremonial practices that kept gentiles, women, children, lepers, and tax collectors at a distance—all these boundary lines are blurred.

Now in Tyre, seeking rest from the crowds, the Syrophoenician woman invites the question. Is the Holy Spirit present here? Jesus—the boundary-breaker who has reinforced the law of division, prioritizing his ministry to the Jews—is asked to look back, to discern if the gospel has indeed been preached, if this is truly good news.

Instead of reading this as a power struggle, of someone winning and someone losing an argument, *Zeugnis* helps me understand this passage as an early example of the priesthood of all believers. The woman in Mark 7 offers the story of her resistance, her reasoning that Jesus has not yet proclaimed good news. She isn't there to make a point. She needs her daughter to be healed, and she knows that Jesus can do it. Jesus receives her word, her discernment of the good news. He recognizes that the word he has preached belongs now to her, to gentiles, to the world. Christ *pro nobis*—for us and for our salvation.

Recently I was at a conference with ministers and lay leaders from 23 different denominations. One day I sat next to a woman who asked me to tell her a little bit about the Mennonite Church. Her first question was, "How many minutes do you preach?" I told her that my preaching typically lasts anywhere from 15 to 20 minutes. "Well, that's not very long!" she exclaimed, eyes wide. "If our preacher spoke for any less than 30 minutes, we would think he wasn't doing his job!"

In response, I told her about *Zeugnis*. While the preacher may take only a quarter of an hour for her sermon, Mennonites believe that the word of God and its interpretation belongs to the entire community, to all who are gathered. We do not discern the word alone, hunched over our Bibles in our pastoral studies or in coffee shops. That may be where our preaching begins, but it is affirmed, confirmed, and corrected by the body of Christ, a priesthood of all believers.

The Syrophoenician woman also offers Jesus a reminder that there is enough good news for everyone. Again, the reader has the advantage of seeing that this literally happens in the feeding of the crowds in Mark 6, with the disciples recovering 12 baskets of surplus. This exchange between Jesus and the Syrophoenician woman is an act of abundance, too. Even Jesus is not left to identify the good news alone.

If Jesus—God with us, Emmanuel—welcomes others to be priests with him, to discern the presence of God's Spirit working among us, how much more do we need one another for the task of discerning the gospel? The God who has set us down together has also given us to one another—to speak the word, to proclaim together the good news of Jesus Christ.