

Can Jesus lose an argument? (Mark 7:24-37)

In Mark 7, a Syrophoenician woman is apparently able to win one with him.

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As a parent, I'm fascinated by the arguments my children can come up with to justify breaking a rule or not finishing a chore. They will argue about the task's importance, develop aches and pains, or rat out their sibling for an unrelated offense. They will resort to desperate tactics in order to avoid punishment. This usually fails. They say that in parenting, you pick and choose your fights, but when you do fight, make sure you win.

I cannot imagine Jesus losing an argument, given his ability to leave the powerful speechless. He often questions religious authority and quotes scripture to make points that religious leaders cannot refute. In other cases, he simply asks questions that leave his listeners confused and unsatisfied with their own ineffective answers.

And yet a Syrophoenician gentile woman is apparently able to win an argument with Jesus himself.

Most parents would do anything for their children. Desperate parents can take desperate measures to improve life for their child. This woman is watching her daughter suffer tremendously, without hope or healing. In desperation, she leaves her child and finds Jesus, begging for help.

Interestingly, Jesus does not offer health simply based upon faith, as he does in Mark 5. Instead he talks with her, explaining that there are proper channels, the proverbial “stay in your lane.” However, this anguished mother argues her case, reminding Jesus that everyone eventually gets into the lane. And Jesus accepts her argument and heals her daughter.

One can understand faith healing, even the distressed attempts of a person in crisis getting Christ’s attention and this being enough for healing. But here we see Jesus allowing a person to plead her case, to put words to her understanding. Instead of presenting himself as all powerful, he humbles himself, acknowledging that there are times to listen, to acquiesce, to admit an argument has merit even if you disagree. Her daughter is healed because in addition to believing in Jesus she makes the proclamation, she makes the effort, she makes the case, and she does the work.

Jesus isn’t really wrong in what he says. He never says the dogs do not eat, just as the woman never says her family is more important than others. They each describe the system as they understand it, and they discover commonality. In a challenging conversation, it is important to take a step back and listen, especially when there are important stakes at hand. Jesus listens.

This story reminds us of Jesus’ ability to meet us where we are and to hear. So state your case. Listen. Let your faith grow and evolve. See other sides of stories. There may be truth there, if we take the time to find it.