

LOVING THE IMPUDENT INTERRUPTER

Messy (Part 4) | Mark 7:24-30

Imagine these situations, if you will: You're at a social event. You are in the midst of telling a story or offering your viewpoint on some significant matter. You are enjoying the chance to express yourself, when all of a sudden somebody else in the circle jumps in and, effectively, grabs the microphone away from you and takes over the conversation. What are you feeling? Or imagine you're rushing to meet a deadline. You are scrambling to finish a project or get out that email or make the house ready, when one of the kids comes in crying: "Mom... Dad...!" What are you feeling? Or you finally get that moment to yourself. You've been working so hard but, at long last, you've got a reprieve and you're just settling into some very-needed and well-deserved rest, when the phone rings or a text pings and it's an emergency, demanding your attention. What are you feeling?

Is it LOVE? Is that what you're feeling in those moments? Christian philosopher, Dallas Willard observes that, biblically speaking, LOVE isn't so much a sentimental emotion as it is a "will" or a heartfelt orientation toward advancing the good of another person. Is that what arises in you in these situation where some IMPUDENT INTERRUPTER jams themselves into your space? Is it a longing for the good of that person that is primary for you? Probably not... And I get that, personally. As we've been saying throughout this series, it's not easy to love the Messy Mob, or the Fringe Figure, or the Different Doer. If loving like Jesus loves were easy or natural, he wouldn't have had to make it a COMMAND.

The Dog Beneath the Table

Like many of us, maybe Jesus needed a vacation. For months now his schedule had been jammed with sick people in search of healing; hungry stomachs eager for feeding; crusty Pharisees questioning his every move; disciples constantly clamoring for instructions and fighting amongst themselves like children. Who'd have blamed Jesus for wanting to leave it all behind? Maybe that's what he was doing when, as we read in the Gospel According to Mark chapter 7 at verse 24: **Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre.**

Now Tyre was the perfect nearby vacation spot. It was the New Buffalo of Palestine – situated on a sandy shoreline 50 miles north of Galilee in what today is Lebanon but was then called Phoenicia. The key idea is that it was a place where Jesus might reasonably think he could rest *incognito*. The Bible even says: **"He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it."** Yet, the text goes on to explain, **he could not keep his presence secret.** Somehow, news leaked out and, **as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an evil**

spirit came and fell at his feet. It's not like this woman was a friend or one of Christ's regular followers. She wasn't even a Jew like Jesus. She was a local. **The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter.**

Now, if you were in Jesus' sandals here, might you be a little bit chafed at this interruption? Maybe that's the tone we hear in Christ's words: **"First let the children eat all they want," he told her, "for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs."** In other words: "Look, lady, give me a break. I'm on PTO here. My mission is to bring the bread of life to the children of Israel, not to waste it on Gentile dogs like you. You'll get your turn when the effect of my work and message spreads; but for now, let me get some rest."

Many scholars think it is this sort of natural irritation we're hearing in Jesus' words. Or maybe like so many of the other "hard sayings" of Jesus, this one was meant not so much to chase away the woman as to challenge her -- to help reveal whether she was the kind of person with whom God could really work, or just another person demanding help on their own terms. This, of course, is why certain sayings of Jesus strike us as "hard." We are used to life on our own terms, used to being the Master. Sometimes Christ has to hit us pretty hard to shake us out of this disposition.

Whether Jesus' statement grew out of fatigue or playful exploration or a little of both, listen to what happens next: **"Lord," she replied, "even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."** **"Then [Jesus] told her, "For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter. "She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.**

Would you explain this to me? What was it about this interrupter's reply to Jesus that so impressed him that he not only chose not to ignore her or throw her out, but to address her core concern? And not only to address it but to do so *immediately* without even needing to touch the girl as he'd healed everyone else. What did Jesus see in this woman that prompted him to move toward her and will and work for her good – in short, to LOVE her? And more personally: What does this tell us about what Jesus looks for in our lives when we interrupt him with our concerns? Or what we might you and I look for in the lives of the people who sometimes impudently break into our day?

Discerning Our Dependence

Let me venture the guess that what Jesus found FIRST in this woman was a striking ***humility***, as rare in His day as in ours. Phillips Brooks, the pastor who penned the lyrics to O Little Town of Bethlehem, once wrote: *"The true way to be humble is not to stoop until you are smaller than yourself, but to stand at your real height against some higher nature that will show you what the real smallness of your greatness is."* As much as we don't know about the Syrophenician woman, this we do: She had clearly

discerned her true size. Her boldness in approaching Jesus might have looked like pridefulness – as sometimes the people who interrupt us seem to be suffering from too much pride. But sometimes it's because they think we are of high enough nature to bear their interruption. Or sometimes they're dealing with something so huge that they feel crushed by it and break into our lives out of desperation.

Maybe the higher nature against which the woman in this story had measured herself was the pain and evil which haunted her life. Day-by-day she had watched her precious daughter's life disfigured and ruined. Whatever this mother's resources had been, she must have discovered -- as the wise usually do -- how you stop thinking of yourself as a Master of the Universe when the tragedies, reversals, and losses of life show you how small your greatness truly is.

Or perhaps it was not so much the encounter with pain, but with the greatness of God that had enabled her to see her true size. Maybe she'd felt that humble awe that overflows the insightful spirit who really gazes at this universe and asks in wonder with the Psalmist: **What is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them (Psalm 8:4)?** Maybe she had heard tales of how Jesus loved and lived as no one else had ever done and simply longed to kneel in the presence of greatness like that. As Austin O'Malley said long ago, when you get right down to it, *"Humility is often simply pride in God."*

We don't know whether it was a sense of awe before a great God, or a sense of vulnerability before the great pains of life that made her who she was. Perhaps it was some of both. What we do know is that she was able to throw aside her pride in herself, bow before Jesus, and plead her cause. We know that when Jesus tells her that she is no more than a DOG under the table, she is ready to admit: "You're right -- I am a humble creature in need of what only You, the Master, can give."

Have you gotten to that point in life? Have you gotten to that place where you know that no matter how great you are in human terms, you are still but a dog, dependent on the grace that falls from the Master's hand? Are you known as someone ready to admit fault when in error; pleased to take on simple roles of service; happier when giving credit to others than when receiving it yourself; more concerned with reconciling a broken relationship than with being right? The famous theologian, John Calvin, once wrote: "When a certain rhetorician was asked what was the chief rule of eloquence he replied, 'Delivery.' What was the second rule, 'Delivery.' What was the third rule, 'Delivery.' *So if you ask me concerning the [chief rule] of the Christian religion," said Calvin, "first, second, third, always I would answer, 'Humility.'"*"

Daring To Hope In The Master

God can work NO wonders in the life of a person who has not stood before the great pain and glory of life and said: "Lord, I am nothing more than a dog, but I am your

dog; work your wonders with me." And yet it is precisely at this point that the good news really begins. You see, this story tells us that Jesus is a dog-lover. In fact when Jesus speaks of "dogs" in this passage he is actually using a diminutive, affectionate term which many scholars believe would better be translated as "puppies." The truth is that Jesus is far more eager and able to serve and care for the puppy who lies begging at his feet than the proud cat who struts around as if to say: "I'll let you know when I need you!" Which kind of creature are you?

Jesus once said: **Those who humble themselves shall be exalted (Luke 14:11).** The Apostle James echoed that thought when he wrote: **Humble thyself in the sight of the Lord and he shall lift you up (James 4:10).** God is looking for people who believe that promise with a passionate expectation. He wants followers who have not only got a humble spirit, but also a hopeful heart. Dogs are impudent interrupters because they have *hope*. Think about it. Why do they paw at us to pet me... feed me... let me out... let me in...? It's because they are convinced we CAN help them in ways they can't help themselves. That, I believe, was the SECOND startling thing about the reply of the Syrophenician woman to Jesus' challenge. She had a dauntless hope in God's grace. I'm just a dog, she thought, but isn't it true, Jesus, that in the Kingdom of God "even puppies under the table eat well?"

I will never forget the springer spaniel I had as a child who taught me so much about humility and hope. Bounder could run like the wind. He could hold onto a tennis ball so firmly that you could pick up the ball with him dangling from it. But for some reason, that water dog could NOT swim. Something about his hind legs didn't work in the water. He'd plunge in and start out fine. Then the back half of him would sink until just his head... and then one eye... and then his nose was above the surface like a periscope... and he'd disappear, until my Dad hauled him out. And he didn't remember this!

One summer day when I was twelve, I was fishing with a friend in the midst of Riegelman's Pond near our home, when I heard a splash near the shoreline and saw Bounder flailing in the water. He'd gotten tired waiting on shore and leapt into the pond to come to me. I shrieked out his name but knew there was no way I could possibly get to him before he'd go under.

For a moment, Bounder just flailed in circles. And then, somehow, he caught sight of my eyes far off in that boat. To my amazement, that dog suddenly began to paddle with a newfound vigor. It was as if he thought: "If only I can stay afloat a bit longer, I just know my Master will pull me out." And he was right. I did pull him out. I believe the woman who came to Jesus that day saw behind the hard words of Jesus a twinkle in the Master's eye too, and knew it was right to hope for help in him.

What I want to ask you is: Have you seen that look lately? Do you realize how deeply the Master is in love with you? How eager he is for you to keep paddling towards him,

until he can lift you out of whatever struggle you're in? That is the gospel dear friends. That is the hope around which this Church gathers and draws strength every week. Our GOD is a DOG lover. There is no wonder He cannot work in your relationships, your job, or your other affairs with His amazing grace. There is no destructive pattern or past in you that cannot give way to His healing touch. There is no trial, loss, or crisis out of which the Master cannot ultimately deliver you. There is no pond of meaningless flailing from which He cannot rescue you. Put your humble hope in the Lord, for there are more than a few crumbs of His grace that God is saving just for you.

Trust in that love. And be a conduit of that same sort of perceptive, persevering love the next time some apparently dirty dog interrupts you.

Please pray with me....

Dear God, we dare to believe that you "will deny no blessing to a thoroughly humbled [and hopeful] spirit."¹² As much as we are frightened by the implications of this prayer - - humble us, O God. Topple our pride and our precarious securities and replace them with a joyful trust in your love alone. Then give us a dauntless hope in your power to work in us and through us amazing things in days to come. For we pray these things in the name of our Master, Jesus Christ. Amen.

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.2.11.

² Charles Haddon Spurgeon