

## Courage, Tenacity, and Compassion in the Pursuit of Life

Mark 7.24-37

St Mark's Lutheran Church

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In a speech at Brown University earlier this year, Cornel West, one of the most provocative and integrous intellectuals in modern society, said among other things *"I am because somebody loved me, somebody care about me."* In today's story, a woman, a mother, uses her body and her voice to fight for and save her daughter's life. Motivated by love, this woman disregards all social norms, demonstrating courage, tenacity, and compassion, in pursuit of life – her daughter's life.

In a recent interview with *The Sun* magazine, Dr West is also quoted as saying: *"Prophetic Judaism talks about **'the nations,'** not just about Jewish folk. Prophetic Judaism ... allowed people to imagine that [God's love, God's justice] is not just for your own clan or tribe but for everybody.<sup>1</sup>"* It is from this **prophetic** tradition, declared most profoundly in Christ's outstretched arms on the cross, that the Christian concept of the universality of the family of God comes. And yet, here we have Jesus, the reason for our being and our gathering today, denying blessings to someone due to tribalism. Jesus responds to the mother's anguished begging, saying, in effect, "I care more about the Israelite people than I do about you and your daughter. You are not entitled to God's blessings."

The irony of this story is that Jesus just finished berating the Pharisees and the Scribes for their sick and sinful doctrine of tribalism. If you remember from last week, Jesus rebuked the religious leaders for creating and perpetuating a legal framework which justified excluding people from the blessed family of God. They were arrogant enough to believe that they could determine who was and was not fit to receive God's blessings. For this Jesus admonished them. And yet here is he is doing the exact same

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<sup>1</sup> "Prisoner of Hope: Cornel West's Quest for Justice," Judith Hertog. *The Sun*, September 2018.

thing. He is demonstrating his point perfectly. “It’s not what you put into your mouth that defiles you, it’s what comes out of your mouth that defiles you.”

Scholars, theologians, and pastors, struggle with this text. Struggle to make sense of why Jesus behaves the way he does. While there are lots of thoughts on this, the most common one is that Jesus is simply being human. In this story, we are offered a rare glimpse of Jesus as fully human and we are disappointed, disgusted by his tribalistic behavior.

Before I go on, let me speak a bit about “tribalism,” since I continue to refer to it. “Tribalism” is defined as the behavior and attitudes that stem from loyalty to one’s own tribe or social group. Today the term “tribalism” is often used as a criticism for closed social groups who employ tactics to safe-guard themselves from others, from outsiders. In the ancient middle east, as well as the ancient African continent, “tribalism” was an expected way of being. Though people lived in Empires, made up of cities, towns and villages, people’s loyalty lied with their tribe or kin group – their extended family. And it was their responsibility to safe-guard their tribe from outsiders – to protect their group from defilement.

The author of the Gospel Mark makes it very clear that the woman in today’s story is not a Jew – she is not from one of the twelve tribes of Israel. This story is only six verses long and yet within these six verses Mark mentions her tribal status three times. He tells us she is: 1) a Gentile (which mean’s non-Jew), 2) she is from Tyre (a region hostile to Jews), and 3) she is of Syrophoenician origin (again, she is not a Jew). Mark makes it clear: this woman is an outsider.

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In today’s story Jesus is confronted and challenged by this outsider. He has traveled to Tyre. He needs a break from the church and break from his ministry. He is on vacation. The text says “he didn’t want **anyone** to know where he was.” And just as he’s settling in with his friends, sitting down to a meal,

having poured himself a glass of wine, in barges this distraught and determined women. Falling at his feet, she begs him for help. “My daughter is in trouble and I need your help,” she pleads.

Now, I am fairly confident Jesus first responded to her with a sigh of exasperation. We all know that sigh, don't we? So, we sort of understand where human Jesus is at. But his response goes beyond exhaustion and exasperation. Rather than telling her simply “no” or asking her to come back later, after he's gotten some rest (neither of which would sit well with us), he not only tells her “no,” but he goes on to say that she is not entitled to a blessing, and then further demeans her by referring to her and her child as dogs, a term often used by Jews to speak about people from this region. Jesus' actions, especially his exclusion of her based upon her lineage or lack thereof, reek of tribalism.

Just like the Pharisees in last week's text and Jesus in today's reading, the church has been and continues to be guilty of tribalism – of attempting to exclude people, to deprive them their rightful place in God's family, due to some human-crafted standard. This practice of the church is deeply embedded. I will give you some examples.

When you hear this story and you imagine this woman, what do you see? Do you see an olive-toned, Arabic or peachy skinned Caucasian woman? Did you know that the people of ancient Syria, where Tyre was located, were of African origin? If we look back in ancient history, we will learn that original name of Egypt was Kemet, which meant “land of the blacks.” Tuthmose III, Pharaoh of Kemet in the 1400's BC extended the reign of Kemet into Iran and Syria. For more than 1400 years prior to Jesus' encounter with the Syrophenician woman, descendants of Kemet were living in the region of Tyre. It was not until 600 years after Jesus' death that Syria and Tyre were invaded by the Arabs and the ethnic composition and thus the skin tone of the citizens changed. The Syrophenician woman's tribe came from Kemet, she was a daughter of “the land of the blacks.”

We imagine her to be light skinned because our contemporary faith has been highly influenced by tribalism. The Imperial Church, long before the Reformation, was intentional about Europeanizing the Christian faith – composing a redacted version of history eliminating any African elements within the institution and history of the church as well as within the story of the origin of our faith. Tribalism was the cause and the consequence of this redacted history. People of African descent, referred to in unhuman terms, much like “dogs,” were not welcome or wanted in the Imperial Church – they did not fit this social-group’s criteria and were therefore excluded. The tribalism that triggered their removal perpetuated an even more treacherous form of tribalism. This new tribalism justified slavery, the Jim and Jane Crow laws, exploding incarceration rates, and hate groups like the Klan, which exist yet today. The church’s own tribalism has been used to justify all sorts of exclusionary and dehumanizing policies and practices. Our country’s resistance to women assuming leadership roles in the public sphere is paralleled by a similar resistance to women assuming a voice in the pulpit. A recent NYTimes article highlighted the dangers women face when running for political office. It reported that most female political candidates have received repeated death threats, demeaning emails, menacing phone calls, many have been stalked, some attacked, and those who are racial minorities have endured a slurry of racial epitaphs and even cross burnings in their yards<sup>2</sup>. The violence women face when attempting to assert themselves in the public and private spheres is in many ways a consequence of the patriarchal tribalism of the church. Out of loyalty a highly patriarchal social group, the church crafted a redacted history obscuring the role of women in the faith and the church. And this false history has been used as a tool and justification for silencing and oppressing women throughout the ages.

If I had more time, I would enumerate how the church’s past and present tribalistic practices have contributed to the social exclusion and oppression of so many of our brothers and sisters: those who are not of Christian faith, those who are not of an upper class, those who are not gender conforming,

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<sup>2</sup> “Women in Politics Run Gantlet of Vile Threats,” Maggie Astor. *NYT*, Sunday, August 26, 2018

those who do not self-identify as “heterosexual,” those who do not follow prescribed social-norms. If I had more time, I would expound on this short list. But I don’t. So, let’s get back to today’s text.

Jesus is exasperated. He is exhausted. He needs a break. He just wants to be left alone. And in the midst of his overwhelming exhaustion, a woman, by herself, without a male advocate, who is a religious and ethnic or tribal outsider, breaks into the house Jesus is at and demands his attention. She defies all social norms into order to get an audience with Jesus. And in his exhaustion Jesus falls prey to his humanity. He dismisses and demeans her.

But the woman, who is on an unstoppable mission, a mission of life or death, will not have it. She continues to ignore social norms and she argues with Jesus.

**“I don’t need a full meal,” she says. “If you just give me a crumb of your power, it’s enough to change my situation.”<sup>3</sup>**

And Jesus changes his mind. Her words help him remember who he is.

There are two other instances in the Gospels where we see Jesus succumbing to his humanity: In the Garden of Gethsemane, when he is pleading with God to spare his life, and again on the cross when he is accusing God of having abandoned him. In each instance he receives a divine word that reminds him of his own divinity and restores him to his faith and his call.

In today’s story Jesus has succumbed to his humanity and the divine word he needs to receive comes to him from this woman, an outsider, someone who is not part of his tribe, someone who does not follow the rules, a person living on the margins.

When the Church succumbs to tribalism, constructing doctrine out of redacted history, it silences swaths of people, creating a stifled message through the elimination of a multitude of opportunities for the divine to speak a necessary word. The woman’s words were necessary. Her words changed Jesus’ life and altered the course of his ministry. From this point on, Jesus’ ministry is not only not limited to Jews,

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<sup>3</sup> Rev Otis Moss III, Quoted from a sermon on the same text at Proctor-CDF Conference 2018.

but his engagement with people from all tribes becomes far more intimate. Rather than telling people they are healed, he touches their faces, puts his hands on their eyes, puts his saliva on their tongues, his fingers in their mouths. His ministry grows deeper, his tribe grows wider, the urgency of his mission grows more intense, and his commitment to God and God's people is unwavering.

Cornel West, in the same interview from *The Sun* asks this necessary question: "*Do we have the courage and tenacity and compassion to move beyond our tribalism?*"<sup>4</sup> The woman in today's story demonstrates courage, tenacity, and compassion as she forces Jesus to confront this question. And the author of Mark, by including this story in the Gospel, forces us to confront this question too.

How wide are the outstretched arms of God? Tribalism would tell us "not that wide." But Jesus tells us, through his death and resurrection, that God's outstretched arms are wide enough to hold all of creation. God's tribe has no limits. God's tribe knows no bounds. As the ancient prophets declared, God's love and God's justice is for all.

Rooted in the cross, which pronounces each of us a member of God's tribe, may we have the courage, tenacity and compassion:

- To identify and critically examine the tribalism we have inherited from the Church;
- To value the life and the words of those whom the world disregards and disdains;
- And, to stand where we belong, on the margins with Jesus, speaking a necessary and divine word to a world in need.

**Amen.**

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<sup>4</sup> "Prisoner of Hope: Cornel West's Quest for Justice," Judith Hertog. *The Sun*, September 2018.