

The Syro-Phoenician Woman

Mark 7:24-30 by Patty Friesen (Aug 29/21)

It's been a number of years now but have I got a story to tell you! It's about that man, Jesus, the Jewish Healer from Nazareth, who somehow found his way all the way out here to the Mediterranean coast to Tyre and Sidon where the blue sea washes up on white beaches. My name is Lydia and I live in Tyre. We are descendents of the sea-faring Phoenicians from the Lebanese and Syrian coastline. We were also known as Canaanites in Hebrew history and are currently called Gentiles by the Hebrews in first century Palestine.

We heard Jesus was trying to get away from all the hubbub he had stirred up in Jerusalem with his healing and feeding people, 5000 of them with 12 baskets of leftovers! In fact, we also heard he had raised from the dead, the daughter of a synagogue leader named Jairus from the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Jairus owned a beach house in Tyre, and had invited Jesus, who was supposed to be incognito on a beach holiday, but word got out that he was in town.

I, Lydia, know everyone in Tyre. I'm a business woman and do business with the Jewish community and I even know Jairus who vacations here in Tyre so I know a thing or two about their religion of the Jewish God above all gods. I know they are called the "children of God," and that the rest of us Gentiles are considered too unclean for inter-marriage and for worshipping in their synagogues and temple. Everything is clean and unclean with them. They even don't have dogs as pets because they think they are unclean! Some of the super-religious call us Gentiles dogs and won't have anything to do with us but many think we are not too unclean to do business with! Our economy

depends on us interacting to some degree! I knew Jairus would never introduce me to Jesus with my problem. It would be too risky for his reputation even though his own daughter had been sick.

My own poor daughter had been suffering from seizures since birth. Everyone said she was possessed by a demon but I think there was something else going on with her head but back in the day everything was attributed to supernatural beings that invaded us and made us sick. I was less interested in the cause of her illness and more interested in a cure. She didn't smile much in those days and neither did I. I had taken her to doctors and prayed to Zeus, and Athena and Hermes and Diana and all the Greek and Roman gods, male and female to no avail. But if the Jewish Healer could raise Jairus' daughter, he surely could heal my daughter whether he was on a beach holiday or not!

I knew the cultural rules, "boundaries" and all that, starting with not bothering people on holiday! Plus who was I, a woman and a Gentile, to ask a Jewish male for anything? I've been on my own long enough to know that no one else is going to look after my daughter. I've had to push and work hard for everything I've got and you all know, you'll do anything for your kids so I went to the beach house. I worked up a confident speech about the history of my daughter and Jesus' own renowned reputation for healing. I got up my courage and snuck past the gardener and there was Jesus lounging on the deck eating figs and relaxing. He didn't look alarmed when he saw me approaching but Jairus did, shaking his head at me. When I got to Jesus, I got nervous and forgot what I was going to say and fell to my knees begging him to heal my daughter. It wasn't my proudest moment but my desperation brought me to this.

He smiled like he was used to weird situations of people falling at his feet begging for healing. He was so relaxed. He didn't roll his eyes at another request or scold me for invading his privacy. He plucked a fig and looking at Jairus, defended his people, saying - "Let the children be fed first. It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." I don't think Jesus meant to be rude. In fact it sounded like he was being sardonic with Jairus and his friends but I wasn't going to stand for it and looked him in the eye and blurted, "Yes, sir, but even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." I meant it. I was tired of religious superiority. If their God really created all the world and all people, then surely their God could at least give us the leftovers under the table.

Jesus seemed to enjoy my answer and threw back his head and laughed saying, "for that answer, you may go - your daughter has been healed." I was shocked and Jairus' mouth was hanging open. I was ready to argue some more but apparently I had already won the argument. But it didn't really feel like an argument. It felt like Jesus already knew he was going to heal my daughter but was just testing Jairus and the other religious leaders. I went home and found her lying calmly in her bed, breathing normally and resting. She looked at me and smiled. You can't imagine how that made me feel.

Afterward, I heard Jesus returned from his holiday to Galilee and healed more Gentiles and even fed 4000 Gentiles outright - never mind the leftovers under the table - Jesus was into **table-top** ministry to our people, feeding and healing us. I worried that might get him killed and eventually it did. I was really sad about that but I've heard rumours since that his body has never been found. His disciples say he has been

raised from death even as he raised Jairus' daughter. I believe the Jewish God can do that. It makes me smile.

Now I worship the Jewish God too in the outer courts of the temple in Jerusalem when I am there on business trips. There are rumours that some of Jesus' disciples have been healing people in the temple like Jesus did and raising the dead and that Jews and Gentiles, men and women, slaves and masters who knew Jesus are gathering undercover in homes and are eating together, remembering Jesus in their meal and how he fed them and continues to feed them in their spiritual lives.

I'd like to be a part of something like that in Tyre. Maybe I could get it started. I've learned it pays to take risks sometimes. What have I got to lose?

After the show in the British TV dramas, actors are out of costume and are interviewed on their perspective of the show and their characters. The gospel of Mark is so spare on its details of the unnamed Syro-Phoenician woman so I took creative license with her, imagining her like another strong Gentile business woman, Lydia, in the book of Acts who was also without a husband and was a leader in the early church in Philippi.

Lydia, the Gentile of Tyre and her sick daughter in Mark 7 pairs Jairus the Jewish synagogue leader and his sick daughter in Mark 5. Both fall on their knees begging for healing and return home to find their daughters raised to health. The Syro-Phoenician woman and her repartee with Jesus is a turning point in his ministry moving him to the healing of Gentiles and feeding of 4000 Gentiles in chapter 8 and the healing of Gentiles. Mark wants us to know that Jesus' ministry always meant to include Gentiles

and creates this profound encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman and a turning point towards Gentiles.

The joy of imagination is that it helps me get into the characters and their physical context in Tyre. Mark 7:34 says Jesus went away on holiday to Tyre to get away from people. I can relate to that, so then I imagine since Tyre is on the Mediterranean coast that Jesus would like to be at a beach house eating figs like I would, and then I wonder how he or I could afford to stay there but through the invitation of a grateful patron like Jairus. I imagine Lydia and Jesus and Jairus in their historical divided religious and social context. It helps me imagine their personalities; their pathos and the power of the healing moment.

In the Voices Together Worship Leader edition we will study this fall in one of our Adult Education classes, it says "Experiencing Scripture told to us as story - as worshippers did for centuries before print communication - can make its message more concrete, powerful and applicable in our lives. Hearing the Bible's truths as story can be especially formative because stories touch our emotions as well as our intellect. I'd like to try more biblical storytelling in sermons and I'd encourage our Sunday School teachers to try to and anyone else who would like to work up something for worship. The arts reveal Jesus and move our spirits in new ways. May God bless the telling of the story of the Syro-Phoenician woman and her encounter with Jesus for our own personal encounters with him. Amen. Let us pray...

Gracious God of all, thank you for the courage of Jesus and the Syro-Phoenician woman to show us your deep desire for healing all. Thank you for the power of bible

stories that can enter our own hearts and bring healing. Bless the seed of your Word to the growth in our lives. Amen.