

“Arguing With Jesus”  
by Rev. Nancy Landauer  
8/17/2011

The woman in our gospel lesson today has a daughter possessed by a demon. Scholars can't be sure what the people of Jesus' time regarded as an unholy spirit, but a child possessed at times is not uncommon even in our own age. Most parents would affirm that at times they have wondered what possesses their child.

Perhaps the child is two, people call it “the terrible twos” the child knows only two words, “no” and “mine.” They insist on doing things for themselves. They tend to spill everything and regularly go through the kitchen cabinets for the joy of taking everything out and tossing it around on the floor.

Or the child is six and living out the discovery, “I am someone.” They insist that someone (me) must have the biggest cookie and be the first in line.

Or the daughter is ten and doesn't want other kids to know that she is eligible for free lunches because her family has a low income. She won't take a sack lunch to school because “no one else does.” She doesn't want the free lunch because she doesn't want anyone else in school to know of her family's circumstances. She would rather go hungry.

Or she's 12 and has just begun to menstruate. She has crashed into awareness that she is a woman. She recognizes her role in life is changing and she is not at all sure she wants to be grown up. Maturity and adulthood beckon and she is frightened, scared.

Now the child who's possessed is 16, she has just gotten her driving permit. She text- messages while driving down the street. She doesn't want any advice; she doesn't need any advice and certainly not lessons about defensive driving. She goes to visit at a girlfriend's house, backs out of the driveway and runs over the mail box and right into the ditch.

Actually the child is 18 and can't decide where to go to college. She applies to several, but refuses to apply to the college her parents went to because the college has a dorky name.

Or perhaps the child is 22, out of school and can't find a job. She announces she is moving back home, but then refuses to follow any of the house rules, because she is a grown-up now.

For a child, the future is always at stake. Like the mother in today's readings, the parents will do anything to insure a child's well being.

On the front inside cover we have printed both Matthew's and Mark's version of the story of the syrophenician woman. Both versions place Jesus in Tyre. Tyre is north

of Galilee and outside of Jewish territory. The geographic boundary suggests not only the ethnic boundary between Jews and Gentiles, but also religious boundaries between spirit and demon, clean and unclean. Jesus crosses the geographic border quickly. In his time, Galilean farmers frequently sold their grain to the non-Jewish people of the sea coast for food and export. Because they often traded with one another they were familiar with one another's beliefs and customs and prejudices.

The syrophenician woman is a Gentile. In coming to Jesus, she crosses the invisible ethnic and religious boundaries to seek healing from Jesus. In fact, no Jewish man would think of allowing a woman to speak to him in public.

Both Matthew and Mark preserve Jesus' insulting refusal to help the woman. "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." He means his wisdom is for the children of Israel – not Gentile 'dogs.'

Perhaps Matthew does not want Jesus to appear rude and so he changes the dialogue between Jesus and the woman. In Matthew, the woman says, "Yes Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs from the table." Jesus responds, "Woman, great is your faith, let your daughter be healed." Matthew makes the woman clearly a believer. She cannot be outside Jesus' mission because she believes he is Israel's Messiah, come with the power from God.

In both stories, Jesus not only refuses to help the Syrophenician woman, he insults her. In fact he uses an ethnic slur when he implies that she is a dog.

How can Jesus, who, everywhere else in the gospels reaches out to sinners, lepers and crazy people, express such closed-minded prejudice to this woman?

Actually this story reflects the conflicts in Christian communities after Jesus' death and resurrection. The Jewish people were beginning to split up over the question of whether or not Jesus was the messiah. They were beginning to argue over whether or not Gentiles could be followers of the Jewish Jesus.

The gentile mother faces a tradition that excludes her.

In Mark's gospel the Gentile woman refuses to accept her exclusion. She argues with Jesus, "But," she said, "even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." She does not regard dogs as unclean animals as Jews do. Both messy children and hungry dogs eat at her house. Her comeback makes space for children and dogs at the same table.

Sometimes Christian feminists wish that the woman had not been satisfied with crumbs, but crumbs and leftovers and yeast have special significance in both Mark and Matthew's gospel. They multiply.

The Woman from Syria, the Phoenician woman, shows leadership and the ability to speak her truth in the face of prejudice. In Mark, she is the foremother who first claims

nourishment for Gentiles from Jesus. She gains access to the power of God at work in Jesus, for the generation of children her daughter represents. She transforms Jesus' "no" into a life giving word. May we continue to use the power of Jesus as a life giving word for our children. Amen