



ST. COLUMBA'S
EPISCOPAL CHURCH

High Fidelity
The Rev. Joshua Daniel, Ph.D.
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[Mark 7:24-37](#)

The pulpit is historically a place of vulnerability and truth telling. A place where the gospel collides with the difficult and personal truths of our lived experience. Honesty, truth, and Jesus -- these three exist as a north star for preachers. Well, keeping that in mind, I start this sermon with a confession. Some of you may find this shocking. My favorite movie ... of all time ... is *Titanic*. I come upon it honestly. I join you in a love of movies that happen in a world based in historical events. That phrase -- *The following is based on a true story* -- alerts us to a certain kind of genre; however unlikely, however mythic and tragic, for the most part, the roller coaster we're about to plunge into is based in historical record. The Social Network, Ford versus Ferrari, Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, Just Mercy ... Star Wars. We love movies based on actual events. Okay, so maybe not Star Wars but you get my point!

This love for the joining of myth and historical fact in storytelling presents us not with a problem exactly but certainly a sharp contrast when reading lots of ancient texts, like the Gospel of Mark. When

telling a true story we naturally think in terms of this formula: establish a solid foundation of facts with meaning sprinkled on top. You've got a boat, the *Titanic*, which actually existed and sunk to the bottom of the Atlantic on an icy April's night because of a totally avoidable set of tragic, misguided, and arrogant (yet understandable) set of reasons -- these well known facts exist as the believable, true foundation of the movie -- and then you have Jack and Rose sprinkled on top. A fictional construction that not only gives the movie a beating heart but irretrievably immerses us into that narrative -- we too become passengers on the ship. We too can stand at the ship's absolute Fore, with Leo's secure, comforting arms wrapped around us, Celine Dion singing in the background, our gaze completely filled by the ocean in front of us and yelling out, *Jack I'm flying!*

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I digress. Mark does not work like that! Lots of ancient stories that are based on historical events are

flipped when compared to modern stories. Modern stories are about facts first and meaning second. Mark, for instance, is about meaning first with facts sprinkled on top. Everything that Jesus does, for Mark, is first and foremost about the symbolic significance of his actions. For instance, Mark is the first person of historical record to call the Sea of Galilee a Sea -- which it definitely is not. It's a lake. In most places you can see across it for Pete's sake! But for Mark when Jesus crosses that body of water it was like Moses crossing the Red Sea, and putting it in that context in the mind of his readers (many of whom knew exactly how big the Sea of Galilee was) created a parallel between Jesus and Moses that Mark believed was absolutely crucial in order to understand the story of Jesus. The mission of Jesus.

In the first three chapters of Mark Jesus confronts religious and political institutions that he believes are fundamentally corrupt. In the name of God they create legal systems to oppress and impoverish. Jesus rebels. He enters the synagogue and commits crimes there -- in one case, all that means is that he heals a poor man on the sabbath -- and this inaugurates, like John before him, a bandit ministry on the run from the authorities, hidden among the poor in the countryside. And also like John before him, Mark makes it very clear that Jesus' actions will directly lead to his political execution by the State.

But Jesus does not just rebel. Jesus also constructs. He rejects an established religion that has no room for the poor. And he works to create a new community where the kingdom of God freely reigns. We've heard some of those stories this summer. Jesus resurrects four different people in the first half of Mark. He literally takes them by the hand and lifts them up.

A lot of the stories in Mark are told twice. Consider this sequence. In Chapter 5, on what Mark describes as the Jewish side of the Sea of Galilee, a man approaches Jesus and asks him to heal his daughter -- to bring her back to life. Jesus does, then heals another, and after, again!, being run out of his hometown, he goes to the Jewish countryside and feeds the poor, hungry masses.

In Chapter 7, the passage we read today, in the region that Mark describes as "Tyre" (a region decidedly *not* Jewish) a pagan woman approaches Jesus and asks him to heal her daughter -- to bring her back to life. Jesus does. Then he heals another and ends his non-Jewish campaign in the next chapter by going out to the gentile countryside and feeding the poor, hungry masses.



That's a very brief sketch. But in this portion of Mark, Jesus through highly symbolic acts creates a political and religious social order grounded on what Jesus calls the Kingdom of God. What is that kingdom like?

First. These parallel stories both end with Jesus feeding the masses. That is, Jesus is deeply concerned with the literal hunger of people. Jesus feeds them in both cases when the crowds decide to share their collective resources. Jesus creates a community that deliberately addresses economic justice in terms of a radical sharing of equity.

Second. In Palestine ethnic and racial bias ran very deep. For the Jewish people -- of whom Jesus was born and raised and died -- there is a strict ranking of positions of honor. Gentiles -- that is non-Jews -- were at the bottom of a very long list. Of course the Israelite priests devised a system that ranked themselves as most pure; way below them

were slaves; way below them were the physically impaired; but at the bottom, below even Jewish women, were gentiles. Impossibly unclean and thus unredeemable.

But Jesus again and again and again makes a concerted effort to minister in “pagan” territory. And nearly everything he does on the “Jewish” side of the lake he replicates in his ministry among the religiously “unclean” foreigners.

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The story of the Syrophenician woman is a remarkable one. Even though Jesus is in a pagan region, the encounter happens in a Jewish home. As Mark’s audience would have experienced it, the offense of her actions is hard to fully communicate. First in a deeply misogynistic culture, she is an unknown woman in a private Jewish residence. Second she dares to challenge Jesus -- essentially shames him -- in an argumentative match.

Make no mistake Jesus’ initial response is demeaning and intentionally dehumanizing. And in the span of just a few verses we see a very rare Biblical theme on full display: the mind of God changes. The woman’s plea softens the heart of Jesus. His posture changes from blindness to sight. This courageous woman captures the sunken mind of God and turns him. And Jesus humbles himself and allows this pagan woman to make him the ultimate teaching example. Jesus will soon tell the disciples that “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Here he puts his money where his mouth is. On full display for all to see. His followers will soon consider him the greatest, one with God; he takes their conception of ranking and literally turns it upside down. Not I but this woman. This pagan. *She is great.*

This week reading the stories in Mark of marginalized women pleading for the most basic forms of healthcare in a world of men who discount and criminalize them -- the sense in which our two societies, even given the chasm of time and cultural differences, are not all that far off.

Now listen. Mark is a gospel full of symbolism. These two parallel stories between Jewish and pagan people are punctuated by Jesus crossing the Sea of Galilee, twice. Both times when Jesus goes, quote, “to the other side” there is a storm that imperils the disciples. In the Kingdom Jesus means to create, the gulf that separates people along race and gender and class is perhaps one of the greatest barriers to overcome. So great that Mark confidently allows Jesus himself to be temporarily waylaid by it.

But Jesus elevating women, pagans, the impure and deformed -- these are not isolated stories. Jesus gives exactly none of his disciples the compliments of faith he gives again and again to women. It is the blind man in today’s story who *proclaims* as Jesus will ask his disciples to; it is the hemorrhaging woman in chapter 5 who has *faith*; and it is Simon’s mother in law in chapter 1 who *serves* Jesus and his new kingdom.

In this section of Mark Jesus creates a new kingdom defined by economic justice -- as shown in the feeding stories -- and religious, ethnic, and racial integration -- shown in Jesus’ willingness to heal and fully inhabit their space.

At St. Columba’s we say *Live God’s love*. That the world needs the love we share. Our faith is not precious. It calls us to action. To address the greatest failings of our own communities. We cannot stand by when the dignity of women is cautiously cast aside. We cannot wait to consider the very great cost of what it will mean to dismantle

racism, to create a kingdom of radical economic sharing and equity.

Let us follow the words and actions of the Syrophoenician woman. And cry out, enough. Amen.