

## **“Faithfulness in Exhaustion”**

Psalm 125; Mark 7:24-37 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
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*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might find rest in your faithfulness and lean on your righteousness in all things. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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Our gospel passage today is somewhat notorious. For centuries, commentators and preachers have tried to whitewash the story of Jesus and the Syrophenician woman, insisting that Jesus wasn't really being ungenerous and prejudiced like it seems, but that he knew he was going to help her and was just “testing” her faith first. The problem with that spin, of course, is that there is no indication whatsoever in the story that that was what was happening. The more obvious conclusion, as we've finally come to accept, is that the Syrophenician woman with the sick child was, as my New Interpreter's Study Bible puts it “the only character in Mark who wins an argument against Jesus.”

You've heard me preach on this before, and we will come back to it in a moment. But first, there's something else I want to look at in this passage, something I've never really paid any attention to before. I think it must have been living through a year and a half of a pandemic that made me notice just how exhausted Jesus is in this passage. The clues are all there: He “went away to the region of Tyre,” which was full of Gentiles whom he likely expected to leave him alone. When he got there, he “did not want anyone to know he was there.” Even the seemingly bigoted

crankiness he displayed in his interaction with the Syrophenician woman makes more sense if we realize he's exhausted. But it goes on into the next story. He didn't manage to stay under the radar in Tyre, so he heads over to another mostly Gentile area. But when he gets there, people still want him to perform healings. He agrees this time, but insists that the deaf man come away into a more private spot, away from the crowd, before he heals him. And when he's done, he commands everyone who knew what had happened to keep quiet about it. Because he just wants to be left alone for a little while, right? All signs point to Jesus needing a serious vacation but finding it impossible to get a break. Raise your hand if that feels familiar!

It feels important to name this right now, because so many of us are teetering over the edge of burn-out and exhaustion. The uncertainty, the isolation, the frantic onslaught of changing information, the grief and fear that this horrible disease has inflicted upon us – it's all too much. It's seemed like the world is ending for months and months now, and yet we've been trying to keep things as normal as possible, in spite of all the evidence to the contrary. So to name that Jesus – the One we call Lord and Savior – also experienced exhaustion, is to find a new way to hold onto hope. Jesus wasn't only faithful in perfect circumstances; he was faithful in the face of division and resistance and danger, and yes, burn-out. And his faithfulness wasn't a perfect, no-mistakes kind of faithfulness that would be pointless for us mere humans to try to emulate. That's why this exchange with the Syrophenician woman is so important. Because it shows us how to maintain faithfulness, even when our

exhaustion makes us mess up. I think we can see God working in this story in ways that can give our weary souls hope.

There are two things I know this morning about exhaustion, and they might seem to contradict one another. The first thing is that exhaustion sometimes means that we will make mistakes; we will forget the ways we have learned to do better as we interact with one another and revert to the bad habits programmed into us by a society less interested in love and mutual respect than our faith calls us to be. When Jesus snapped at the Syrophenician woman, insulting her in her time of need, I imagine there was part of him that knew, even as he was saying those words, that they weren't the truest words of his heart. That wasn't who he'd been sent to be; it wasn't how God had called him to treat people. But Jesus was as fully human as he was divine, and that means he was susceptible to being shaped by the systems of belief he was born into, as we all are, including the biases inherent within those systems of belief. In this moment, when he'd been desperately needing a quiet get-away where nobody knew him and no one would make any demands on his time, those biases broke through his better intentions and instead of responding with compassion, he rejected that anxious mother's plea and insulted her. We've been there, haven't we? And sometimes we scramble away in shame and try to never have to see that person again, but sometimes something else happens.

The other thing I know about exhaustion is that sometimes it provides an opening for a change we needed but kept getting in the way of. When we're less tired,

we're better at guarding the barriers we've built up over time to protect ourselves from having to change. We see threats to our current stasis as they're coming and head them off at the pass. But when we're exhausted, our vigilance wanes and we are more vulnerable to being taken by surprise. Should we be surprised that God knows this about us? Should we be surprised that God would use this reality to promote growth in our lives, growth we might have otherwise resisted?

The Syrophenician woman was a messenger of God. She came to Jesus with a plea to help her daughter, but beyond that, she also brought a course correction that Jesus hadn't yet realized he needed. "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Was she acquiescing to his insult? Was she admitting that she was less worthy even if still a little worthy? No, she was pointing out to Jesus that even the metaphor he was using to justify his inherited prejudices was more generous than the way he was trying to apply those prejudices. And maybe he was just too tired to argue anymore, or maybe he was surprised out of his assumptions into a new perspective where he could suddenly see the full scope of the ministry God had given him, not limited by race or religion, but a ministry of grace and healing for all people. It's amazing what God can do with us when we get out of our own way. And sometimes exhaustion is the only way we will get out of our own way.

Things are hard. Life is hard. Faithfulness is hard. There are echoes all throughout our tradition of people wishing it could be easier. "Lead us not into temptation," we pray. Or the high poetry of Psalm 125: "For the scepter of

wickedness shall not rest on the land allotted to the righteous, so that the righteous might not stretch out their hands to do wrong.” Or the plea in our Gathering Song this morning: “Let thy goodness, like a fetter, bind my wandering heart to thee.” Just make us be good, God! Take away the possibility that we could do bad things, and we’ll be good all the time.

That certainly would make it easier. And right now, easier is pretty attractive. But it’s not necessarily what we have in front of us. What we have, instead, is unknown more months of upheaval and uncertainty. What we have, instead, is a continuing revelation of the consequences of the systems of prejudice and supremacy that have shaped us that is harder and harder to ignore. There is no known end-point to the exhaustion we’re experiencing. So it’s vital that we envision what faithfulness in the midst of exhaustion looks like. It’s relieving to know that this is one more human struggle that Jesus has shared with us. And perhaps, if we examine these dynamics carefully in our own lives, we can build on the openness to surprise that exhaustion can bring, instead of yielding to its tendency to make us behave like we don’t know any better.

Maybe today we can pray that God can use even our being too tired to argue for good. Maybe today we can give thanks for the woman who sassed Jesus into accepting the full scope of his mission. She is our forebear, after all, – the reason we got invited into this grand work God is doing in our world – so surely we shouldn’t try to silence her descendants who interrupt us when we’re trying to relax by pointing

out all that is still wrong with the way our faith is being lived out in these trying times. Maybe today we can actually find rest, if not from an actual nap, then by turning to Jesus who continued to heal, even when he was tired, and learned something in the process. Can we be opened, like the ears of that deaf man, and like Jesus himself? It may seem too hard, but maybe our weariness is exactly how God is going to accomplish what comes next. May it be so. Hallelujah and Amen.