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## Put a Lid on It

Mark 7.24-37

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on September 6, 2009 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

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I wonder whether you've ever had a moment when someone else has seen who you really are, and looked you straight in the eye, and said nothing... but somehow, for ever after, you've known you couldn't pretend with that person, because even if *they'd* later gone on to forget that moment *you* never could, and would always recall it whenever you would later see them. I had a moment like that a few weeks after I was ordained and first began in parish ministry.

As in every church since the days when Joseph played wide-receiver for Israel, the new associate pastor led the youth group. And so it was that with my co-leader I hosted the church youth in my apartment living room one August evening. As we played some nonsensical but purportedly faith-building or at least team-bonding game, I handed round my newest food discovery: sour cream and onion Pringles. You have to understand this was 1991, and this was just about the most addictive food invented up to that point in human development. Turned out everyone liked them as much as I did, and I was alarmed to see fistfuls of curvaceous wedges being rapidly funneled down adolescent consumption chutes. Five minutes later my co-leader spotted the cylinder of Pringles with the lid firmly back on, lodged between my protective backside and the bottom of the sofa. I've never forgotten the look she gave me. It said "Are you *really* keeping all those for yourself? I never realized you were so greedy, so selfish..., and so *mean*."

I want you to leave aside for a moment my pathetic attempt to put a lid on the Pringles, because I'll come back to that, and focus on the moment when the consumption of the Pringles started to take on wildfire proportions. Because that's precisely the moment where we enter Mark's gospel this Sunday morning. The healing of the Syrophenician woman's daughter is a key moment in Mark's gospel. It sums up the sequence of miraculous doings that's gone before. We've had stories of an unclean spirit, of a closed door, of a woman drawing improperly close to Jesus, of a parent distressed over a daughter. It's as if all the previous miracles are coming to a head in this story of the Syrophenician woman and her demon-possessed child.

And why is that so important? Well, this story is also equidistant between the two decisive miracles in Mark's gospel – the feeding of the 5000 in chapter 6 and the feeding of the 4000 in chapter 8. Let's look more closely at those two stories for a moment. The feeding the *five* thousand took place in *Jewish* territory and resulted in *twelve* baskets left over. These numbers 5 and 12 are significant. Five is shorthand for Israel because of the 5 books of the Law that begin the Bible. Twelve is the number of the tribes of Israel. Meanwhile the feeding the *four* thousand took place in *Gentile* territory and resulted in *seven* baskets left over. Again the numbers 4 and 7 are significant. Four refers to the four corners of the earth and 7 refers to the seven days of the whole creation, back before the calling of Israel through Abraham as a people set apart.

And now for the missing link. The Phoenicians were a widely dispersed people, because their trade was all by sea. This woman is a Syrophenician because she was from one branch of this Gentile people, this global people, the branch who'd settled to the north of Israel in the land broadly known as Syria. Listen to what Jesus says to this Syrophenician woman, this global woman: "Let the children be fed first" – or, more literally, "Let the children be *satisfied* first." Why is the word "satisfied" so important? Because it's precisely the same word that appears in the feeding of the 5000 where it says "and all ate and were satisfied," and again in the feeding of the 4000 where it says, almost identically, "they ate and were satisfied."

So what's happening in this intense dialogue between Jesus and the Syrophenician woman is not just the climax of all the ways in which Jesus heals but more exactly an enactment of the transformation from Jesus as the messiah for the Jewish people to Jesus as the savior of the whole world. The debate between Jesus and the woman starts as a conversation about healing – but Jesus quickly turns it into a debate about food. In just the same way in the two feeding stories Jesus crystallizes the whole question about the extent and depth of his mission into a drama about food.

Jesus comes first to the Jews: they are hungry, and then they are satisfied. Jesus has an argument with a Gentile woman: he says let the Jews be satisfied first – then we'll worry about the Gentiles. She says you've got more than you need for the Jews – you've got enough to feed the whole world with the leftovers, the crumbs. And I'm hungry! Hungry for the food that only you can give! Then Jesus comes to the Gentiles: they're hungry, and then they're satisfied too. What the feeding stories tell us *visually* with their image of the baskets of leftovers, this conversation tells us *verbally* with its words about feeding the Gentiles with the crumbs that are left over from the Jews. The first feeding tells us after Jesus has fed the Jews there's plenty left over for the Gentiles. The second feeding tells us after satisfying the Gentiles there's *still* plenty left over.

But over and over again today's story tells us that that's all very well – there may be plenty left over but that's not what it feels like. Remember we start with Jesus getting a long way away from the action. Tyre is way up in Yankee territory, where it's all Gentiles. There's not a lot of Jews around. It says he "didn't want anyone to know he was there." He's a long way from Israel and he's keeping a low profile. So no one should be bothering him, right? Wrong.

Here's this woman, breaking every cleanliness code in the book, bursting in through the closed doors and spending time alone with a male stranger. She's breaking national boundaries, as a Phoenician, she's breaking religious boundaries, as a Gentile, she's breaking gender boundaries, as a woman, she's breaking courtesy and propriety boundaries, as a person who won't respect a messiah when he needs a bit of space. And the degree of transgression she's asking from Jesus matches her own. He's already crossed a territorial line by being in lands north of the land of Israel. She's asking him to take on the boundary of the demonic by encountering her daughter. And she raises the whole issue of food laws – the most common stalling-point in Jewish-Gentile relations – by all her talk of giving food to the dogs.

Last week we read the previous passage where Jesus breaks through these dietary laws by declaring all foods clean. Now he makes an even *more* radical step by declaring all *eaters* of food clean. That means salvation can apply to the Gentiles, they too can become members of the inrushing kingdom, they too can eat and be satisfied at the Lord's table – which is exactly what is depicted happening a few verses later when the four thousand are fed.

By presenting this miracle as the synthesis and climax of many previous miracles, by piling up the symbolism of numbers and settings, by noting the wave upon wave of gendered, national, religious, dietary, decorous, demonic and territorial pressures on Jesus, the story is portraying Jesus – and through Jesus, Israel – as being overwhelmed by the inrushing need and longing of the Gentiles for God. There is so much God, so much grace, so much kingdom, so much forgiveness, so much eternal life, all crystallized by the astonishing abundance of the two feedings and the many baskets left over. But while the gospel is one of overflowing glory, here we get the other side of the story too, the sense of drowning in overwhelming *anxiety*. The woman in this story represents the simple truth that the gospel means overwhelming grace. Jesus' reaction reflects Israel's fear that overwhelming grace means overwhelming anxiety.

Here's the challenge of this story to us today. On the one hand we see the woman with her simple, persistent demand that Jesus take the logic of the gospel to its obvious conclusion. She may be high maintenance, she may be a disciple with more elbow activity than we'd think polite or well-mannered or respectful. But she's obviously right. And here on the other hand is Jesus, representing the ancient loyalties of Israel, to be set apart and so reflect the holiness of God understood in the Torah, the Jewish law.

Let me ask you this. Why is it we always assume we are the Jews in this story? Why do we expend all our energy on willing Jesus to be more generous, suppressing our dismay that he's so rude to the woman, wondering how Israel could be so small-minded as to keep salvation to itself? That way the story merely underwrites our managerial reading of the gospel, that, granted, it's clearly intended for everybody, but that's going to take a huge amount of administration and infrastructure, and it's inevitably all going to fall to us, so please bear with us, we're getting there, but privately we're overwhelmed with anxiety and the gospel is really too much for us. Why don't we instead identify with the woman? – Knocking, nudging, demanding, teasing, even flirting our way to get Jesus' attention and *let us into the kingdom*, for God's sake. (Literally.) That's the

question this story puts to us today. Is it because everything in us is trying so hard to avoid seeing ourselves as beggars?

This story is offering us the gospel. But it's up to us how we hear it. If we assume salvation belongs to us, our gospel is going to be one of entitlement and responsibility, where Jesus seems to be dashing off some kind of unfulfillable public policy memo. But if we allow ourselves to be like this pleading woman, our gospel is one of astonished grace that God has bent his ear even to us and showered upon us healing and forgiveness and eternal life. Both of these gospels describe degrees of overwhelming – but only one of them is one of joy.

Look at the way today's passage starts and finishes. It starts with Jesus doing a Greta Garbo and saying "I vont to bee aluhn." In no time his day off and the kingdom of God are broken open by a woman whose thorough understanding of the implications of the gospel make her both impatient and dangerous. The passage ends with Jesus' ironic gesture of releasing a man's tongue and then telling him to say nothing to anyone about it. Mark tells us, "The more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it." The lesson is clear. The gospel is not a cylinder of Pringles. You *can't* put a lid on it when its infectious, addictive character makes things get out of control. Whoever you are – Jew, Gentile, synagogue leader or mother of a demon-possessed child – the gospel is going to overwhelm you.

What was going in my sitting room 18 years ago was not just me being greedy and hoarding the tasty Pringles to myself. What was happening was that I was realizing, like many young pastors before me and since, that this youth group were starting to take over my life, that their needs and discoveries and questions and tender faith was beginning to disturb my deep-rooted introversion and my newly-minted financial independence. Ministry was beginning to overwhelm me. So I literally and metaphorically put the top back on the Pringles. What a fool I was. You can't put a lid on the gospel. You can't manage it. You can't keep it under control. The moment you try to do so you look as mean and ridiculous as I did that day in my apartment. It just can't be done.

It may be that right now you're feeling overwhelmed. It may be that you've come here this morning precisely for a bit of peace and quiet – because your domestic or professional life is overwhelmed. Overwhelmed with the pressures of trying to be generous and kind without becoming totally exhausted and humiliated and bankrupt. Well, I've got news you don't want to hear. Maybe you're reading this story from the wrong point of view. The gospel is all about being overwhelmed – but not by responsibility and anxiety and strategic administrative policies and domestic chores. The gospel is all about being overwhelmed by the discovery that there's room in the kingdom even for one like you. That's what the Syrophoenician woman discovers in this story. If church or Christianity has become for you just one burden among others dragging you down into bewildered exhaustion, maybe it's time you started reading the story from her point of view. You can't put a lid on the gospel. You can't keep it under control. The gospel is all about being overwhelmed. But are you being overwhelmed by burdens – or by grace?