

On the Margin

Jesus set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

This Sunday we will hear Mark's version of a story about Jesus that is very troubling. A Syrophenician woman cries out to Jesus to heal her daughter. By the end of the story, her daughter has been healed — but between the crying and the healing, Jesus says some terrible things. He's arrogant, racist and just plain mean. We may believe that Jesus was "truly human," but we don't want him to be too human. So over the years, people have tried to clean up this story. But none of them suffice. This story can't be scrubbed to make it any better. Mark dares to show us a very human Jesus and he paints a specific picture of this woman. She is a Syrophenician woman. She is not one of Jesus' people. Jesus has gone into a non-Jewish region so this should be no surprise. This is her home. Yet she seems to know who Jesus is. She begs him to heal her daughter who is tormented by a demon. She's desperate and comes out and makes demands on a very tired Jesus. Her daughter is suffering and she is willing to demand that Jesus help her. She is on the margins and her desperation knows no dignity. The polite structures of society have broken down for her and she is willing to accost this stranger about whom she has heard great things. Jesus' initial ugly rejection of her is sharp and does not match our understanding of him. But, upon the woman's feisty reply to his insult, he is changed. The daughter's suffering is ended and Jesus has a new vision for his ministry—he is now here for all of God's people. Suffering is at the heart of the human condition. Though it takes many forms and most of us attempt to hide it, suffering is ours none-the-less. If our suffering is turned too far inward we mask it with anger, alcohol, denial, or a number of means and ways. For some, suffering cannot be hidden and our response to such suffering can range from compassion to cruelty. We do not like to witness suffering for too long because it can remind us of our own vulnerability. We begin to evade individuals whose suffering is prolonged or we push them out to the margins of our life where desperate measures are all they have left. Jesus is the very template for how we learn to suffer with others. He shows us, even in this ugly exchange how we are transformed from indifference to deeply engaged. It has been said that we suffer with others when we choose to share the hurt that life or circumstance has laid on other people. This is where empathy and compassion become a way to move through the world. We give up our tried and true deflections and denials and we get close to our own suffering or the suffering of others. In identifying our own pain, we can then let another's suffering in. If we allow another's pain to slip into our hearts, we become healers in a hurting world. Or we might hear a voice from the margins that calls us out on our hardened hearts and we are moved to respond as this encounter between Jesus and this desperate mother illustrates. If Jesus could be changed, can we? Every generation sees some people as "other" and puts them under the table. We could make a long list of people we see as different — different race, different customs, different religion. Are we able and courageous enough to open our hearts and minds and see Jesus in their faces, in their lives, and in their marginalization? Suffering for suffering's sake is never something Jesus advocated. Although in Sunday's Gospel Jesus is briefly the hard of heart, Jesus suffered constantly. He suffered at the hands of religious authorities, government officials, from the rejection of his family and friends as well as from those who promised to stand with him to the end, but then deserted and left him to die alone. As those who follow Jesus we are invited to the margins, we are called to see another's suffering as our own. Can we hear the voices that are demanding we pay

attention? Can we love and heal as Jesus did in the midst of our own world-weary fatigue? We can if we follow Jesus into the way of love, the way of putting aside our fear and falling headlong into a life marked by courage and compassion.

Grace and Peace, Stephanie+