Feeding Our Children  
Mark 7:24-37  

24 From there he 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, 25 but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. 26 Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. 27 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." 28 But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." 29 Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." 30 So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone."

Have you seen the cartoon of a man in an optician's office? He has frazzled hair; his eyes are wild; his legs are trembling. He has been through something. He says to the doctor, “Doctor, I would like to see things a little less clearly.” That could have been any of the disciples at the point of today’s scripture.

The biblical context for today’s passage is an overdue vacation for Jesus and his disciples. Jesus had led his disciples out of Galilee into the coastal country of Tyre seeking rest. They all needed it. In the previous chapter, the people of Nazareth, Jesus’ hometown, reject him. He then sends out the twelve in pairs without any material resources to rely on the hospitality and generosities of people they meet, to preach, cast out demons, and heal. While they are out, John the Baptist is beheaded. At that point Jesus said to his disciples, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest" (Mark 6:31). Instead of rest, they arrived to find a crowd of five thousand had followed them. Jesus had compassion on them, taught them, and then told the disciples to feed them. The disciples did not have the resources to feed such a crowd. Jesus showed them they did by blessing the five loaves and two fish they did have and feeding the multitude. Jesus orders his disciples into a boat to go to Bethsaida while he goes to the mountain to pray. A storm brews on the sea, rocks their boat, and fear for their lives. Then they see Jesus walking on water and are terrified more. He identifies himself, gets into the boat, and the storm ceases. The most exasperating event of all occurred when they landed in Bethsaida. Religious officials came to him to complain that his disciples ate food without properly washing their hands. The very people who knew the scriptures the best focused not on the power of God to overcome evil and transform the world but on a ritual of hand washing. Jesus taught them, but their judgmental attitude drained him. He needed that vacation that was interrupted several episodes ago, so he goes to Tyre, a Gentile town, to get away from religious Jews.

Mark describes an encounter that occurred while Jesus was on that vacation. The way Jesus spoke to this Gentile woman has troubled me for years. I have understood it as Jesus in a weak moment, having demands placed on him when he is tired and needing rest. I can get snappy with people I love the most when I am tired. When I am tired and snap at people, they usually leave me alone. That appears, on the surface, to be Jesus’ intention here. In addition, the encounter provides further evidence that first century Jews and Gentiles did not generally like one another. In fact, their cultures and religious
traditions taught them to remain separate. When the Gentile woman begs him to cast
demons out of her daughter, Jesus’ answer is very curt and biting: “Let the children be
fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s bread and feed it to the dogs.”

A lot of Bible scholars and preachers have explained away this biting statement of
Jesus to make Jesus look better in it than he does. Some say that Jesus only spoke
those words to give voice to the prejudice his disciples were whispering (Make that dog
go away) and to teach them that God’s grace was for all, not just Jews. Although that
was the result, this explanation dismisses the bite of Jesus’ words too quickly.

I am convinced that Jesus spoke carefully chose the words he spoke to this woman,
and instead of attempting to drive her away, he engaged her in a deep conversation
about an economic problem that hurt poor people. According to Bible scholar Gerd
Theissen, there was socioeconomic tension between Jewish Galilee and Gentile Tyre in
the first century. Much of the agricultural produce of Galilee did not find its way to the
tables of Jewish peasants, but to the markets of Tyre (The Gospels in Context
[Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991], 72-80). Therefore Jesus’ remark about it being unfair to
take the children’s bread and give it to the dogs is a prophetic statement challenging an
economic system that takes the food from the hungry and gives it to those with the
money.

If we believe that Jesus only speaks to spiritual matters and not socio-economic realities
then this passage is harder to explain. He is simply rude to a poor woman. When we
understand that his statement addresses a rich woman and the economics of the time,
his words become prophetic. Gentiles in the coastal nation of Tyre were by far wealthier than Gentile peasant farmers and they are eating the food the peasant Jews
lack. Jesus speaks stinging words against this practice.

What would Jesus say about the economy of our day in which there is an abundance of
food produced around the world but still massive starvation in parts of our world? What
would he say about the United States where obesity is our number one health problem
when one child dies every 5 seconds of hunger related illnesses in Africa’s poorest
countries? The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations report that 925
million people in our world do not have enough to be healthy. That means one in every
seven people in our world goes to bed hungry. Hunger is number one on the list of the
world’s top ten health risks. It kills more people every year than AIDS, malaria and
tuberculosis combined.

Look at what happens in this passage. A Gentile woman comes to Jesus for help with a
spiritual problem her daughter has and Jesus turns the conversation to a socioeconomic
problem. That is the opposite of what many of us think Jesus does. We tend to think
we come to him with a socioeconomic problem and he shows us the problem is
spiritual. Here is the key to understanding this passage. With Jesus, you cannot
separate spiritual problems from social, economic, or relational problems. One cannot
isolate spiritual problems from other issues and be well. And this woman would find out
what I have to keep learning about issues in my own family. Her daughter’s problem
was not just her daughter’s problem. It was a problem in the family system. This
woman’s belief in Jesus’ ability to heal was part of her being well, but so was her
recognition that with Jesus there is enough for the rich and the poor, the Gentiles and
the Jews. “Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master’s table” is a statement with a double meaning. Gentiles were referred to as dogs in some of the Old Testament writing because of our willingness to eat anything, whether it is kosher or not. That there is enough for the dogs at the master’s table recognizes that there is no scarcity either of grace, of financial resources, or food in our world. God has provided enough for all. There was plenty grace and love for this woman’s daughter too. Her role was to offer her daughter that grace and love. She could not force-feed it to her. Her daughter would have to receive it to continue to be well.

Migan McKenna tells in a book titled Parables about a woman who wanted peace in the world and peace in her heart and was very frustrated. The world seemed to be falling apart. She would read the papers and get depressed. One day she decided to go shopping, and she went into a mall and picked a store at random. She walked in and was surprised to see Jesus behind the counter. She knew it was Jesus because he looked just like the pictures she’d seen on holy cards and devotional pictures. She finally got up her nerve and asked, “Excuse me, are you Jesus?” “I am.” “Do you work here?” “No, I own the store.” “Oh, what do you sell here?” “Just about everything,” Jesus said. “Feel free to walk up and down the aisles, make a list, see what it is you want and then come back and we’ll see what we can do for you.” She did just that, walked up and down the aisles. There was peace on earth, no more war, no hunger or poverty, peace in families, no more drugs, harmony, clean air, careful use of resources. She wrote furiously. By the time she got back to the counter, she had a long list. Jesus took the list, skimmed through it, looked up at her and smiled. “No problem.” And then he bent down behind the counter and picked out all sorts of things, stood up and laid out the packets. She asked, “What are these?” “Seed packets,” Jesus said. She said, “You mean I don’t get the finished product?” “No, this is a place of dreams. You come and see what it looks like, and I give you the seeds. You plant the seeds. You go home and nurture them and help them to grow and someone else reaps the benefits.” “Oh,” she said. And she left the store without buying anything.

The woman only wanted healing for her daughter who had a spiritual problem she called demon possession. She came to the right person. What Jesus gave her was direction to work on the health of world and not just her daughter’s health. We sometimes think we cannot address anyone else’s problems before we fix our own. In reality, we cannot separate life so neatly. As Henri Nouwen described in the The Wounded Healer, Rabbi Yoshua ben Levi sat at the city gate unbinding and binding his wounds. He unbound and bound them one at the time so that if anyone came to him in need, he might bind his own wounds rapidly and help them. That’s how it works with Jesus.

Fred Craddock tells the story of a missionary sent to preach the gospel in India near the end of World War II. After many months the time came for a furlough back home. His church wired him the money to book passage on a steamer but when he got to the port city he discovered a boatload of Jews had just been allowed to land temporarily. These were the days when European Jews were sailing all over the world literally looking for a place to live, and these particular Jews were now staying in attics and warehouses and
basements all over that port city. It happened to be Christmas, and on Christmas morning, this missionary went to one of the attics where scores of Jews were staying. He walked in and said, “Merry Christmas.” The people looked at him as if he were crazy and responded, “We’re Jews.” “I know that,” said the missionary, “What would you like for Christmas?” In utter amazement the Jews responded, “Why, we’d like pastries, good pastries like the ones we used to have in Germany.” So the missionary went out and used the money for his ticket home to buy pastries for all the Jews he could find staying in the port. Of course, then he had to wire home asking for more money to book his passage back to the States. Not surprisingly, his superiors wired back, asking what happened to the money they had already sent. He wired that he had used it to buy Christmas pastries for some Jews. His superiors wired back, “Why did you do that? They don’t even believe in Jesus.” He wired back: “Yes, but I do.”