

Let me start by offering two phrases for us to consider this morning:
Scope of Work and Power of Conviction.

A scope of work is a set of expected and agreed-upon parameters for an endeavor that someone undertakes. Hey, Neighbor, do you think you could help me move next weekend? Hello, Mr. Contractor, do you think you could help me paint a small room? Hello, Ms. Consultant, do you think we could procure your services to answer a simple logistical question? The neighbor might expect to help for an afternoon, the contractor for a day, and the consultant for a week.

But what happens when it turns out your friend hasn't even started boxing their belongings when you show up on Saturday morning? And what happens when it turns out that small room could double as a banquet hall in Versailles? And what happens when that simple logistical question is NOT so simple, and is more like ten questions?

I'll tell you what happens. The contractor says, "Hey dude, I didn't sign up for this!" When we make it half-way through a project and discover we aren't anywhere close to halfway through, there is an inevitable sense of frustration.

Second phrase: power of conviction. We're all disciples of something. Yes, I know we consider ourselves disciples of Jesus, but we're disciples of other things, too. There are educators among us. Musicians, healthcare workers, clinicians, artists, purists of various interests: woodworkers, baseball aficionados, linguists, justice advocates, the list goes on. If we are passionate about something, called to something, knowledgeable about something, it also means we are intentional. We pay attention to all the forces, both good and bad, that affect the wellbeing of our cause or interest. An ire develops for the casual fan, or

the obstructionist, or the politician, or the outsider that willingly or unwillingly disrupts the progress of our convictions.

This morning, we meet Jesus, and he is tired, and you might even say overwhelmed. He and the disciples are huddled up in a place called Tyre. It could be they are seeking safe haven from the Temple establishment that's not so thrilled about Jesus' non-establishment tendencies. It could be that's it been a harrowing and busy couple of weeks, and Jesus just needs to catch his breath and reset. Whatever the case may be, Jesus and the disciples are here, because they expect at least some degree of invisibility.

I also want to make the argument that Jesus is reckoning with the massive scope of his new calling. It's not apples to apples, but remember when God sent Jonah to Nineveh to proclaim destruction, and then God changed God's mind? Jonah had prepared himself to go and do one thing, and then all of a sudden he had to prepare himself for something entirely different: mercy and salvation rather than destruction. I think it's fair to say that Jonah could have been a bit more professional in his response, but raise your hand if you've never lost your emotions upon the realization of shifting expectations. Sometimes, it's not easy to regroup, and re-channel, and refocus.

We live in a post-Paul, post resurrection world, where the kin-dom of God is considered accessible to everyone. That is to say, the Gospel is a wide funnel – we're casting a wide net. But that's not how Jesus initially understood his calling. Truth be told, he thought his work was confined to Israel, more congregational in nature. Like the prophets before him, he'd fulfill Torah for Israel, and Israel would eventually fulfill Torah for the world. It's not that Jesus lacked compassion for Gentiles, it's that he had a limited set of resources to accomplish his vision in a

limited amount of time. He had a plan, a good plan, and he was sticking to the plan.

You also need to know that Jesus was observant. He wanted to help his neighbors liberate themselves from the oppressive tendencies of systems. I think it's fair to say, as much as anyone who has ever lived, Jesus could identify destructive tendencies on the micro level that most affected the macro level. The temple tax, and all of its fingers – its minions, its policies and procedures, its infrastructure – handcuffed the spiritual capacities of the peasant class. And the ruling class – the vassal lords, the rich merchants, the patrons of Caesar – they handcuffed the economic capacities of the peasant class. Jesus speaks directly, bluntly, and matter-of-factly to these offenders.

This is a lot of background, but I think it's necessary. It's necessary, because most of you are probably hanging on to a troubling verse.

“Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.”

Hold up. Did Jesus just call Jewish people children at the table, and Gentiles dogs fighting for scraps? Not very Jesus-like. Not very human-like. Certainly not polite. Just very mean and dismissive. It feels like Jesus could do a lot better.

There's some truth there. Jesus could and should do better. But there's context, too.

I think Jesus has seen the writing on the wall. He's gonna have to broaden his approach to ministry, and he knows it's not gonna be easy. He's carrying that frustration.

But we also tend to mix our gospels. I'll bet that most of you, even though nothing is said about the health, wealth, or status of the Syrophoenician Woman (remember, we only know her daughter is afflicted by a demon), imagine a beggar, or an outcast. But this isn't the Woman at the Well, isolated from her neighbors. Odds are, she's a wealthy woman, living in a region that benefits from the exploitation of Jewish peasants. If Jesus is creating a triage system, it's not usually going to start with the most resourced neighbors. So he's carrying a sentiment that says, "Of all people, you can wait your turn."

I know for some of you, there's probably no reclaiming this verse. You don't have time for a Jesus that's grumpy and cantankerous. But for me, personally, I love this verse. It makes me feel SO connected to Jesus. It lets me know that he struggles with the difficulty of the very same lifestyle he calls each and everyone of us to follow.

I didn't mention it last week, but there's a verse in the story of Jesus walking on water, where he intends to "pass on by" the disciples struggling in the boat. Maybe it's a similar feeling to the priest and the scribe on that Jericho Road long ago. It's just not part of my scope. But something compels Jesus to join his neighbors.

The same is true today. The Syrophoenician Woman could be the Queen of England, or the Woman at the Well – it really doesn't matter. She points out to Jesus, "Hey man, your ministry is compelling, and powerful, and if it's worth anything, it's got to be available to people like me, too! Good Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

And here is what I love about Jesus, what I most aspire to be like. He knows she's right. She's 100% right and he's 100% wrong.

If it were me, even knowing that she was 100% right and I was 100% wrong, it'd take a minute, maybe even a day, or a week, or a month to back off of my position. And I'd probably proclaim a slew of four-letter words, too, if I am being honest! And there would be a lengthy process of discernment, too. What did I say, and what was the reasoning that got me there, and where's the point where the argument fell apart, and how can I save some face without having to 100% say I was wrong. I was wrong, yes, but there was a good reason for being wrong! And at some point, hopefully sooner than later, I'd come to my senses and reconcile.

I know Mark's in a hurry, but there's no mention of a pause, or a period of discernment here. Jesus agrees. "I was wrong," he says. "Go, your daughter is well. And thank you for helping me to see the absurdity of what I just said. Maybe I had to hear your pushback to understand my faulty logic. Let's fix this, and move forward."

My dad, in his many sermons was fond of the phrase, "Jesus tells us about good news that seems too good to be true." You want to know how clever, and how wonderful, and how bold our Creator is? The most spiritually-enlightened person we have ever known pushed the boundaries of his ministry because he was challenged by someone diametrically opposed to his views of the world. And all of us, are better for his openness and her forthrightness.

And I wonder Sardis, what capacity might we have to glean knowledge about God's love from someone who thinks differently than us? Is it possible that God's good news might also be available to extremists, and zealots, and climate-change deniers, and patricians, and tax-collectors, and robber-barons, and those who represent the very policies and ideas we spend our entire lives seeking to overturn?

Jesus refused to limit the sources of his transformation to the people with worldviews just like his. Jesus discovered that transformation had to be possible not just in his own life, but in the lives of others. Jesus believed in absurd and outrageous and too-good-to-be-true possibilities of our Creator.

The Syrophoenician Woman demanded access to possibility. In the season ahead, I wonder if we, like Jesus, have the strength, courage, and humility to deem her worthy of such possibilities. May God grant us open hearts and open minds to imagine new pathways of possibilities.

Amen.