

Jesus was way outside his normal territory. He'd been crossing back and forth across the Sea of Galilee, ministering to people throughout the region. When suddenly, he sets out for the port city of Tyre – 35 miles from Bethsaida – along the Mediterranean coast.

We don't know why he decided to go so far way. But we do know that when he entered the house in Tyre he didn't want anyone to know it. And yet, Mark says, "He could not escape notice." His reputation preceded him. People in that place had already heard about him. Word got around. They knew he was a healer. A **real** healer – not one of those magicians....all smoke and mirrors.

Word got around. And a woman with a sick child came knocking at his door. Ethnically, she was both Syrian and Phoenician – two cultures that have a long and not very peaceful history with Israel. Culturally, she was Greek and deeply Hellenized. Whatever you call her, she was not Jewish. To the first century Jew, she was a pagan idol worshiper. To a first century Jew, there was a derogatory name for who she was. They could have called her a dog. That's what Jesus **did** call her – no matter how you read it.

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

This story comes up as an assigned reading in our lectionary about once every three years. Every time it does, it doesn't really get any easier to hear – or preach. If you're hearing this story for the first time, it can paint a disturbing picture of our Savior.

Is this the Jesus we know? The one always ready to heal and forgive, to restore and make new? How could He speak to her this way? How could he seem so uncaring? And why in the world would this very unflattering picture be included in not one, but two of the gospels?

There, at the far edge of his ordinary travels, comes a woman from the far edge of what would have ordinarily been important to a man like Jesus. And she is asking for help. She is not a Jew. She belongs to a people who worship other gods. She is not timid. She is not paying attention to the usual customs which separated Jews and Gentiles. When Jesus tries to shut her down, she will not be silent, but instead engages him in intelligent debate – and in that way, she succeeds not only in getting Jesus' attention but persuading him to heal her child.

"Good answer!" Jesus said. "Go on home. The demon has already left your daughter."

There is nothing quite as determined as a desperate parent.

There were all kinds of ways that Jesus' ministry with his own people had put him at risk. Tax collectors, prostitutes, bleeding women, people possessed by demons, all of them were costly relationships for Jesus. The very nature of his ministry marginalized him. And now, this woman, who was way beyond the border of his own area of concern – now **she** expected him to cross the lines even further.

Jesus had his hands full trying to deal with the “lost sheep of Israel” and here is this woman, who had absolutely no right to claim a blessing from Jesus, begging for the sake of her daughter.

We are used to the gospel stories of those on the margins. We have heard how Jesus ministered to children, tax collectors and prostitutes. We know of his mercies to those who were sick and needed healing. We have seen him reach out to those who had been turned away by others. So it is more than a little surprising when Jesus refuses her with these words” It is not fair to take children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” She is not of the house of Israel. She is a Gentile and Jesus mission is to the Jews.

If you were writing a gospel, would you put this story in it?

She comes begging for the life of her daughter. He compares her and her people to dogs. She could have simply walked away. She could have cussed him out. She chose to do neither. Instead, she calls him to be the Savior she has heard so much about: “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”

She challenges him in a way that reminds him of who he is. And because of her faith, the circle of those who were counted among the lost sheep of Israel suddenly and forever increased.

I love this woman so much because she just keeps pushing and pushing for what is fair. Not more than her fair share, simply for what is fair.

Tomorrow we celebrate Labor Day, an annual celebration of workers and their achievements, originated during one of American labor history’s most dismal chapters.

In the late 1800s at the height of the Industrial Revolution in the United States, the average American worked 12-hour days and seven day weeks in order to eke out a basic living. Despite restrictions in some states, children as young as 5 and 6 worked in mills, factories and mines across the country, earning a fraction of their adult counterparts’ wages.

People of all ages, particularly the very poor and recent immigrants, often faced extremely unsafe working conditions, with insufficient access to fresh air, sanitary facilities and breaks.

As manufacturing started rising compared to agriculture, labor unions, which had first appeared in the last 18<sup>th</sup> century, grew more prominent and vocal. They began organizing strikes and rallies to protest poor conditions and compel employers to renegotiate hours and pay.

Many of these events turned violent during this time, including the infamous Haymarket Riot of 1886, in which several Chicago policemen and workers were killed. Others gave rise to longstanding traditions. On September 5, 1882, 10,000 workers took unpaid time off to march from City Hall to Union Square in New York City, holding the first Labor Day parade in U.S. History.

So the idea of a “workingmen’s holiday”, celebrated on the first Monday in September, caught on in other industrial centers across the country, and many states passed legislation recognizing it. Congress would not legalize the holiday until 12 years later when a watershed moment in American labor history brought worker’s rights squarely into the public’s view. On May 11, 1894, employees of the Pullman Palace Car Company in Chicago went on strike to protest wage cuts and the firing of union representatives.

On June 26, the American Railroad Union, led by Eugene V. Debs, called for a boycott of all Pullman railway cars, crippling railroad traffic nationwide. To break the Pullman strike the federal government dispatched troops to Chicago, unleashing a wave of riots that resulted in the deaths of more than a dozen workers.

In the wake of this massive unrest and in an attempt to repair ties with American workers, Congress passed an act making Labor Day a legal holiday in the District of Columbia and the territories. On June 28, 1894, President Grover Cleveland signed it into law.

From the 2016 Book of Resolutions, the United Methodist Church

1. encourages all employers – and especially employers who are United Methodist – to share prosperity with workers and seek ways to reduce disparity between top and bottom wage earners;
2. supports efforts by governments to ensure living wages indexed to inflation, expand health care benefits to workers, expand and protect worker pension programs, set core national standards for workers for paid sick days and paid vacation days, and limit mandatory overtime
3. calls upon government agencies to expand targeted investigations of industries that routinely violate wage and hour laws, partner with workers’ centers and congregations that are in ministry with low-wage and immigrant workers, and develop new print and online resources for educating workers about their rights in the workplace

4. affirms efforts by governments to explore new mechanisms and policies to improve standards for wages, benefits and conditions for workers in low wage jobs
5. asks United Methodist seminaries to expose seminary students to worker concerns through teaching, internships and field placement opportunities and
6. urges the General Board of Church and Society and the General Board of Global Ministries to partner with organizations such as the National Farm Worker Ministry and Interfaith Worker Justice to engage United Methodists in education and advocacy to improve wages, benefits and working conditions for workers in low wage jobs.

You see, sometimes our denomination gets things right! We care about workers rights and we have fought for them in 1908 when the Methodist Social Creed called for equal rights and complete justice for workers and an end to child labor.

Sometimes the world seems overwhelming and we need someone to be the example for calling out for justice, even when the person you are badgering is Jesus Christ. The Syro-Phonician Woman shows us what we can do when justice is lost. We can speak up, again and again. We can demand justice, again and again.

I don't know what kind of demon the woman's daughter had, but it must have been pretty bad for her mom to be so audacious. And I'm glad she was, because now you and I have a hero in the Bible, a hero who shows us that we can be persistent in our calls for justice even when its not the norm, even when seen as unacceptable.

Workers rights are human rights and we need to be persistent in our calls for safety, a living wage, time off etc. We see that now during the pandemic with people refusing to work for less than a living wage, right? People who have realized that they make more on unemployment than what companies are offering. But we have seen some companies taking heed and realizing that they need to offer \$15 an hour and they need to offer health care and they need to offer education packages.

Keep on fighting. Keep on nagging. If you were writing the gospel lesson, would you include this story? I sure would. It shows how a woman of deep faith and conviction can even change Jesus mind and help him see the injustice of his own words. Let us go forth with conviction and a nagging spirit. Amen.