

The past several weeks have been a whirlwind of activity—caring for my mom as she was dying from a very rare and aggressive form of cancer, helping my dad move to assisted living, taking over the finances of my parents, making funeral arrangements, and saying goodbye to Mom. When I sat down to prepare for this Sunday and read the scripture, at first I thought, “Oh no, one of the most challenging stories about Jesus shows up this week! That’s all I need right now!”

I’ve never quite known how to respond to this story. The main character is referred to as a Syrophenician woman, which points to her native land of Phoenicia, a coastal area along the Mediterranean Sea. Since this area was part of the larger region of Syria, the term Syrophenician designates where she came from, but even with all this data, the story doesn’t name her. In addition, the text says she is Greek or Gentile, which was a term often used to refer to those who were not Jewish. The terms together designated her as an outsider woman, considered a nobody in her day.

And yet, she had a daughter who had an unclean spirit. Some might suggest the daughter was possessed by an evil spirit, or we might today diagnose her with some mental illness. Either way, her mother boldly

approached Jesus for help. Jesus had already been approached by numerous people seeking healing, but what seems strange in this encounter is Jesus’ reply: “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Many interpreters of this story suggest that Jesus was referring to the woman and her daughter as outsiders, as dogs, seeing himself as bringing hope only to his own Jewish people.

The woman cleverly uses his insulting imagery by flipping it around: “Even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs,” she replied. Her cleverness prompted Jesus to heal her daughter, possibly opening him to the fact that God’s healing is available to everyone, not just to the insiders who have worshiped together for generations. This unnamed woman could have been the spark that prompted Jesus to realize his mission was greater than he anticipated.

That’s as radical of an idea as our early Disciples leader Alexander Campbell, who was headed to the semiannual communion service after having passed the test of reciting the creeds. He had received a small coin-like token as his admittance to the table, and while walking to the chapel, he saw a beggar pleading for a

token to gain access to communion. Alexander had been struggling with the limited access to the table common in those days, and this sight shook Alexander's view of communion, which he realized should not be barricaded by one's ability to recite the creeds. Anyone should be able to approach the table of God's grace, and so Alexander threw his token on the table and walked away without communion, which planted the seeds for the movement we now know as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

I sometimes wonder why Jesus offered such harsh words to the woman, for she was only trying to help her child. If you look at the stories before this event, we get a clue. Jesus had been healing people, had tried to find some escape by crossing to the other side of the sea, had learned of his cousin John's death, had been rejected in his own hometown, had fed a large crowd of people, and had just finished arguing with the religious leaders about the traditions of the elders.

And right before the woman approached him to heal her daughter, the narrator tells us that Jesus "entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice." In the midst of all this

labor and arguing, it appears Jesus was hoping to get away for some rest!

Maybe Jesus was so tired that when the woman approached him for help, he snapped at her and offered harsh words, which prompting him to reexamine his mission as broader than he originally envisioned.

On this Labor Day weekend, when we celebrate the jobs and labors that we have, maybe we also need to take time to celebrate our times of rest. When we overdo too much labor or too much rest, we may find ourselves out of balance. Many of us began working at an early age, starting with homework, yardwork, or tasks around the house. Even learning something new can feel like work, as one mother and child discovered.

A surprised mother found her four-year-old son crying as he was tying his shoes. "Why are you crying?" she asked.

"I have to tie my shoes," he sobbed.

"But you just learned how. It isn't that hard, is it?"

"But I'm gonna have to do it the rest of my life!"¹

In the midst of all the things we need to do, even those things that feel as though we've been doing them all our lives, sometimes it's important just to stop and reflect about what we're doing, as Jesus did when the

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woman approached him for help. One writer noted the importance of taking time to stop.

Sometimes, we just need to stop.... Stop the procession through duties. Stop the noise. Stop the churn. Not stop forever, but stop long enough to get connected again.

Stopping isn't easy. Duties don't vanish....Stopping can feel dangerous. Stop at work, and you risk falling behind.

Stop at home, and resentments can build. Stop responding to other people's claims, and you get tagged as uninterested, callous, arrogant. Stop trying to do it all, and you discover your own limits.

Stopping can feel like failure and losing. I am convinced, for example, that we church folk just need to stop fighting about the same-old issues. We don't agree, we won't agree, we can't budge each other, all we can do is wear ourselves out for the things that truly matter. Stop

the arguing, I say, even if that feels like losing. If the arguments have any merit, they will still be there when we are connected again. ...

Stopping leads inescapably to moving. Stopping isn't an escape from action. Stopping is the precursor of truly making a difference with our lives.²

Life is always in a flux of change as we encounter those who offer new ideas that challenge the way we see the world. Taking time to rest may open us to new ideas and ways of doing things that can make a difference in the world. So, I invite you this Labor Day weekend to celebrate your work and your efforts, and to also take time to rest and reflect on God's invitation for your life.

¹ Hodgkin, Michael. *1001 More Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, and Compelling Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers*. Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #991.

² Tom Ehrich, *On a Journey e-newsletter* for October 23, 2003, as quoted in *HomileticsOnline*, 9/5/21,