

Let us pray,

Dear God, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight oh God, our strength and redeemer. Amen.

It's December, it's the end of the year, it's been a very long year for some, and I imagine for many of you, you're looking forward to retreating somewhere, for a day or even weeks, just to take a break from the many demands of this world.

Jesus had just that same thought when he retreated with his disciples to Tyre and Sidon take a break. He too had had a long run, was feeling exhausted and needed to pause and refuel.

As it happens with Jesus, word got out that he was in the area. A woman had a very very sick daughter, we don't know the nature of her sickness, but she was so sick that when her mother heard that Jesus was in the area she dropped everything she was doing and went to where Jesus was, fell at his feet, and begged Jesus to cast the demon out of her daughter. At this point, her daughter was at home, lying in bed, sick. There's nothing worse than witnessing the illness of a child, so you can feel her desperation, a mothers desperation.

One important thing to understand about this interaction was that she was a Gentile and Jesus was a Jew, meaning they occupied very different societal privileges and experienced life very differently, and frankly wouldn't be caught dead with one other. To be a Gentile in this context was to be rejected, stigmatized, unwanted, "the Wretched of the Earth" as Frantz Fanon, an Algerian revolutionary would say. To be a Jew was to be of a higher class, was to have societal and cultural privilege that validated not engaging with Gentiles.

And so, how then does Jesus respond to her? Jesus says "First I should feed the children—my own family, not yours. It isn't right to take food from the children and throw it to the dogs." She then replies, "That's true, Lord, but even the dogs under the table are allowed to eat the scraps from the children's plates." To this Jesus responds, "For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter." She went home and found her child lying on the bed, safe, healed, the demon gone.

I'm sure your eyes are raised at this point, wondering what just happened in that conversation? We have here a Gentile woman, desperate for her sick daughter to get healing, and then only to receive what sounds like absolute dismissal from Jesus, who then comes around and heals her daughter.

We encounter here perhaps an exhausted Jesus, having a very human moment, speaking from his position of privilege, speaking in what sounds like a demeaning, dehumanizing manner

towards this Gentile woman. This doesn't sound at all like the Jesus we know and talk about... the one who feeds the 5000 or makes the lame walk

Howard Thurman, reflecting on Jesus experience in this moment says perhaps Jesus "had in it all the deep frustration which he had experienced, and there flashed through it generations of religious exclusiveness to which he was heir."

It sounds like Jesus too had his own internalized default settings that he fell back on when things were trying, or maybe even his exhaustion getting the better of him. After all, he was fully human.

So what is it that caused such grave desperation for this woman, to show up and withstand this tough and tense conversation with Jesus?

What is at stake here for this mother is her daughter's life, her daughter's future, and her desired reality for her, including the importance of modelling survival skills given her daughters societal realities as a Gentile; learning to trust her intuition and speaking up where necessary.

Her response to Jesus was almost sarcastic, she says: "did you just hear what you said? It sounds like you're contradicting yourself." She calls Jesus out, saying even if she's eating the crumbs from underneath the table - the fact is it's the same bread, and in the same way that Jesus heals others, her Gentile, marginalized child too has the right to healing.

In today's terms we can interpret this to say even if she's using food stamps, she too has the right to healthy, quality food; even if she's taking her children to affordable or free public schools, they too have the right to good quality education.

It was hard for this woman to push back, it can feel easier to despair, and to what has come to you is what you deserve.

In a climate where even the disciples are perpetually confused by what Jesus says, she responds with certainty and clarity, convicted in her truth and desired reality for her child, knowing that there is a different reality available for her, she speaks up to Jesus and reclaims her humanity, and Jesus cannot deny this mothers heart.

Jesus anxious to do right by God, anxious to do right by her, receives her teaching, and changes his mind, Jesus learns from her that all are welcome, that even marginalized children are worthy of Gods dignity.

At the proclamation of her words, her daughter, who was at home, waiting, is safe, healed.

Who knows, but maybe in this desperate mother, Jesus saw his own mother and remembered his own birth story. How his mother was ready to give birth, desperate for a safe place to have her child, but turned away, turned out. Maybe he is remembering how there was no room in the inn in Bethlehem, which is the same as saying there was no room in the innkeeper's heart. Maybe Jesus sees in this desperate mother, his own desperate mother... desperate for her child's future.

In this passage we are challenged to have a heart for children, we are challenged to allow ourselves to be interrupted in our comfort zones, to respond to a need even if we might not have been prepared for it. And more so, the urgency of children who are at times overlooked.

I know we can relate to sheer desperation, we can resonate with her actions, when something is not going well with someone you care deeply for.

A sick child, is a sick a child, and how much more complex the health concerns of those who remain marginalized.

Just as this gentile child was waiting at home for her healing, there are many children who are waiting, waiting for healing, waiting for safety, waiting for someone to speak up, waiting for something that will help re-write their futures.

In our context today, we might want to reflect on those conditions that are controlling the future and destinies of our children, that are distorting their realities, those things that relegate children to waiting, waiting at home, at the border, kidnapped, trafficked, not being educated, malnourished, separated from their families, displaced, and there are even those who die waiting. Children separated from their families at the Mexico border, the almost 20000 children who die each day from poverty related, children trying to cross the river in Syria and not making it.

I know that we all care, but caring is not easy, it is hard hard work, it is overwhelming, it questions and confronts our enoughness, we are afraid of being challenged, afraid we'll lose something, afraid of being changed, afraid of admitting that at times we are numb, that at times we don't care. This admission, this pausing to look into is precisely what this season of advent asks of us, to allow ourselves to be interrupted, to have a change of heart.

Jesus, during his time of retreat is challenged by the sheer gravity of the worlds needs that can never seem to escape him, and that can never seem to escape us. He shows up, and allows himself to be tendered, to have a change of heart, inviting into the kingdom of God, all children, and more so those who remain marginalized and in unspeakable situations.

In this season of advent, we wait with breaking hearts, knowing that too many of the world's children are in desperate circumstance. Let us refuse to forget them. Let us never turn our backs on them. Let us continue the hard and trying work we have begun:

Building beds for Boston children without beds

Supplying school supplies and mentoring to the young people of Snowden High School

Supporting City Strings

Supplying gifts for over 130 local children who are in foster care

Purchasing coats for local children to keep them warm

Supporting families in imminent threat of deportation with sanctuary: with safety and support

This is only but a small start, let us hold steadfast and not grow weary, allow ourselves to be transformed for the dignity of all children.

None of us can do this alone. But we can do it together. We are doing it together, as the church, as the hands and feet of Jesus.

As we open up our hearts to feeling, to being made tender, let us continue to garner courage to bare witness, to care with urgency and see the liberation of these little ones through.

Let us take a moment to be in remembrance as I offer a prayer in closing.

Dear God, parent of baby Jesus and of all the world's children, we know it takes a whole village to raise a child. Grant us in this community of Old South Church the strength and resolve to be a part of that village, doing the good work, fighting the good fight. May we continue to allow our hearts to be open to being transformed. Amen.