

June 14, 2020

*“Unnecessary Battles”*

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Mark 7:24-30

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I know that many of us like to read and learn about history. So I thought I'd tell you a little story about Andrew Jackson. He's important because not only was he the seventh president of the United States, but also because his face is on the \$20 bill. I'm sure for many that creates an immediate affinity for him. After all, who doesn't like having a few Jackson's in their wallet. But, seriously, before all this, Andrew Jackson was also a famous general. One of the most famous battles he fought was during the War of 1812 against the British, at the Battle of New Orleans, where his troops prevented the British from gaining control of the city and the Mississippi River. That deadly battle was fought in January of 1815 and over two thousand men died. Now, what's ironic is that a peace treaty ending the war was signed in December 1814. But back in those days, there was no Internet of course, so the news traveled very slowly and neither the British troops, nor Andrew Jackson's army ever received word that the war was over. If he had known that peace had been declared, what needless death and suffering could have been avoided. In hindsight, it seems like such a waste, so unnecessary. Yet, this is a lesson for us as well; for how many of us fight unnecessary battles?

Because that's what it seems we're in the midst of, every day, when we turn on the news, or go on the internet, or even sit at the family dinner table. Unnecessary battles, unnecessary arguments. It's no secret that families and friends have figuratively come to blows when discussing the issues of the day. Obviously, there's the George Floyd incident, which I discussed in detail last week, and has become explosive. There's a defunding the police movement, there's an autonomous zone in Seattle. There's still the coronavirus concern, and even the experts don't agree on what to do. Mask, no mask, six feet, three feet, open up entirely, or keep controls in place. And then, boiling just below the surface, is the upcoming general election with two very flawed candidates for president on both sides. That's sure to generate some major fireworks. But apparently we seem to enjoy all this turmoil. Apparently we like fighting. It must be in our DNA, we've been doing it for thousands of years. Yes, we apparently like fighting more than we do... cooperating. When it comes to our opinions or beliefs, especially nowadays, it seems we're much more intent on winning the battle, winning an argument, than pursuing the real truth of a matter, or coming to agreement, or even compromise, on what's fair or right or just. Let me say that once more. When it comes to our opinions or beliefs, it seems we're much more intent on winning the battle, or winning an argument, than pursuing the real truth of a matter, or coming to agreement, or even compromise, on what's fair or right or just.

Now why might that be? Well I think it's all about a thing called pride. According to virtually every Christian apologist, pride is an anti-God state of mind and it leads to every other vice. Like arguing, which could lead to even worse. C.S. Lewis says that pride has been the chief cause of misery in every nation and every family since the world began. So that's what we're going to talk about today. About how not to fight, unnecessarily. About how not to argue with our friends and family, unnecessarily. But instead, how to disagree... well. That's right, how to disagree... well.

And we learn how to do this from today's Scripture where Jesus loses an argument because of a woman who knew how to disagree... well. Let me explain. Jesus is in the region of Tyre, which is southern Lebanon today, about twenty-five or so miles north of Lake Galilee. There he encounters a gentile woman, of Greek descent – a pagan. And she has a daughter who is suffering from some ailment and needs help. Now we all heard today's scripture and on the surface it appears a somewhat harsh narrative, but let me remind you of some important facts that have an critical bearing on the story. First, Jesus, is a Jew and a Rabbi, and he is not in Jewish territory. He probably went to Tyre to minister to the small Jewish community there. But the Tyrians were bitter enemies of the Jews, and, in fact, the Scripture specifically states Jesus didn't want anyone to know where he was staying. So there's obviously some serious concern on his part. Second, there were a number of strict social and ethical taboos in place at the time. For instance, Jews were not to associate with gentiles. And women of the time were not supposed to speak with men in public. So this is the scene: Jesus wants to stay under the radar, when suddenly, this woman barges in, falls down at his feet, and publicly solicits Jesus for a favor. In one way, she's showing a lot of courage, exhibiting both a tenacity and a faith that Jesus could heal her child. But she has no regard as to the situation she has just placed Jesus in. And this so mimics us today. It's that, "It's all about me" mentality with no regard for the other person's concerns or feelings. So Jesus, both divine, and fully human, reacts with a righteous anger and instead of showing mercy or compassion, Jesus upbraids her and refuses her petition, referring to the woman and her daughter as dogs. Dogs!

Now just as an aside, don't you find it very odd that Jesus said this? I do, because we're not used to him being stern with us. However, I think the problem is that nowadays we have sometimes turned Jesus into a quivering mass of affirmation and oozing graciousness. All we speak about is Jesus' love, but never his tough love. This despite the fact that he frequently, unguardedly, and gleefully tells us that we are sinners. Anyone who thinks that Jesus is only into inclusiveness or self-affirmation or heart happy

acceptance has then got to figure out why we responded to him by nailing him to the cross to die. You see, he got there not by telling us to consider the lilies of the field or the birds of the air, but by calling us at various times whitewashed tombs, and even worse... dogs!<sup>1</sup>

Dogs! Now here is where, if we were in the woman's shoes, most of us would want to fight and win the argument. This is where our prideful nature would put us on the defensive and blind us to what issues or circumstances might be affecting the other person. This is where our prideful nature might want to 'up the ante' letting the situation spiral out of control. This is where our prideful nature might actually hurt us by preventing us from getting what we want. But this woman does things differently than we might do. And that's what makes this Scripture passage so important. You see, instead of striking back at Jesus with angry words, this woman calmly disagrees. More so, she disagrees... well. How so? Consider, the Bible tells us, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." Proverbs tells us, "These six things the Lord hates...", absolutely hates. These are not things that annoy God or frustrate God, but things that God hates. And the first thing on the list is pride. You see, that's how this woman answers Jesus, well. Not with arrogant defensiveness or vengefulness driven by pride, but instead she answers with humility. According to evangelist Dwight Moody, she says something to this effect: "Yes, Lord, I acknowledge I am a gentile, a pagan, a dog to your people. But I know that even dogs have some privileges, and when the door is opened they can come in and crawl under their master's table. When the bread or the meat sifts through the cracks of the table or falls off the edge of it, they lick it up, and the master of the house is not angry with them. I do not ask for a big loaf, I do not even ask for a big slice. I only ask for that which drops down through the chinks in the table, the dog's portion. I ask only for the crumbs." Yes, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." And this is exactly what the woman received from God. Grace. Because Jesus was so impressed by her humility, with the way she responded to him, that he tells the woman, "For saying that, you may go, the demon has left your daughter."

I want to close by making two points. The first is that humility is a channel to God and his goodness and mercy. Just as our canine friends know and accept their place in relation to their master, we need to know our place in coming to God. So often we go around worshiping self, our pleasures, our things. And we are pagans in a large sense of the word. We go through our days rarely thinking about God, and

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<sup>1</sup> Will Willimon, *Sinning Like A Christian*

then when troubles befall us, we suddenly rush to God, demanding answers, demanding action, demanding our way. Instead, if we were in a right relationship with God, one in which there is humility, faith, trust, obedience, dependence, and most of all love between us and our master, then we can take heart in knowing that he will never send us away from the table empty-handed. Never!

And secondly, not only is humility a key virtue in dealing with God, but in dealing with others as well. For humility helps us to listen to the other, humility helps us stay patient, and humility helps us think more clearly and wisely. Proverbs tells us that “pride leads to disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom.” And certainly our country can use more people who are truly wise. Wise in dealing with difficult people, wise in the pursuit of truth, and wise in bringing about justice and peace. We may not all agree on how to achieve these elusive goals, but at the very least, as Christians, we will know how to avoid those unnecessary battles and know exactly how to disagree. By disagreeing... well. Amen.