# Congregational-Presbyterian Church

 **“Great Faith”**

**Mark 7:24-30**

 **February 14, 2021**

How do you respond when the Lord says no to your prayers? After I had been on staff with a church in Boulder, Colorado for about ten years, circumstances began to indicate that it might be time for me to move on. I didn’t want to go. I enjoyed the church and my ministry there, our family was well settled and they didn’t want to move, so I began praying that the Lord would work things out for us so that we could stay. And, the more I prayed, the more I sensed that God was telling me no. I was not going to get what I was asking for.

This morning we are in chapter seven of Mark’s Gospel where we read a story about a woman who comes to Jesus with a request and receives from him a no. I invite you to turn with me to Mark 7:24-30

Then Jesus left Galilee and went north to the region of Tyre. He didn’t want anyone to know which house he was staying in, but he couldn’t keep it a secret. Right away a woman who had heard about him came and fell at his feet. Her little girl was possessed by an evil spirit, and she begged him to cast out the demon from her daughter. Since she was a Gentile, born in Syrian Phoenicia, Jesus told her, “First I should feed the children—my own family, the Jews. It isn’t right to take food from the children and throw it to the dogs.” She replied, “That’s true, Lord, but even the dogs under the table are allowed to eat the scraps from the children’s plates.” “Good answer!” he said. “Now go home, for the demon has left your daughter.” And when she arrived home, she found her little girl lying quietly in bed, and the demon was gone.

A Gentile woman comes to Jesus and begs him to cast out a demon from her daughter, and Jesus responds with a statement that seems harsh if not downright rude. He, the Jewish Messiah, has come into the world to take care of his fellow Jews first. He should not take their meal and give it to the family dog. And, while it may make us uncomfortable to admit it, there is no getting around the fact that Jesus uses a common and insulting word that Jews had for Gentiles, namely “dogs.” There will come a day when Jesus will send his disciples into all the world, bringing the Gospel to Jew and Gentile alike, but now, this day, his focus needs to be on his own family. “It isn’t right to take food from the children and throw it to the dogs.” This brings us to the key moment in the story. Jesus has essentially said no to her request. How will she respond?

There is no indication that the woman was surprised or offended by what Jesus said. In fact it didn’t seem to deter her at all. She was aware of who she was. She was aware of the cultural and religious differences between Jews and Gentiles. The situation is the reverse of what happened when Jesus, travelling through the region of Samaria, came across a Samaritan woman at a well. When he asked her for a drink, she said, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan, for a drink?” Just like the woman at the well brought up the barrier to a Jew receiving a drink from a Samaritan, so Jesus brings up the barrier of a Gentile asking for a miracle from the Jewish Messiah.

But, just as Jesus didn’t focus on the barrier in his conversation with the woman at the well, neither does the woman with a demon possessed daughter dwell on the barrier between her and Jesus. She doesn’t take offense at his words, nor does she give up and walk away. Instead, she responds in faith, believing that anything he could give her, even if it’s just the scraps from the children’s plates, will be sufficient for her and her daughter.

I believe that this was Jesus’ intent all along. His purpose was not to insult her but to respond to her in such a way that her faith would come to the fore. He could have given an easy, “Sure, I’ll be glad to heal your daughter,” response. Instead, he indicates that there may be a reason for him not to heal the little girl, a response that she needs to wrestle with. Jesus has said no, but he has not dismissed her. She has heard his no, but she has not walked away. And, in response to her great faith, because of her belief in him in spite of his initial rebuff, he heals her daughter.

Are there times that you and I are like this woman? We come to Jesus with a request and he does not do as we have asked. We ask for his help but nothing changes; perhaps it even gets worse. Does such an answer – or non-answer – cause us to throw up our hands, walk away, and say, “Why bother?” Or, perhaps this time, having heard and meditated on this passage from Mark’s Gospel, we don’t take issue with Jesus. Instead, we build on what we know about him. We trust there is a good reason for his initial no and we think about a different way to approach the issue. We imagine a new scenario, a new possibility, and we pray again with new faith, new energy, and new vision. Perhaps this time, Jesus answers you differently. Perhaps this time, Jesus helps you to see beyond what you initially wanted to discovering something even better, something even more in line with his will, something that will give even more glory to God.

When I began changing my prayer from, “Please let us stay here at the church in Boulder,” to “If you want us to leave, where do you want us to go?,” I went from hearing no to hearing, “Let me show you.” He showed us that the next place for us was Austin, Texas, where I would attend Seminary, become ordained, and pastor a church. If God hadn’t pushed, we wouldn’t have left Boulder. But, he pushed, and we entered a new chapter in our family’s life, where God was able to continue growing us in ministry, in love for him and for one another. When Jesus says no, could it be that he is giving us opportunity for an expression of faith that never would have occurred to us if he had said yes?