

Cliffhanger!

Mark 7:24-30; I Thessalonians 5:10-18

The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights

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*To hear this sermon as preached in worship, please visit
<https://castyournet.files.wordpress.com/2018/06/sermon06-03-2018.mp3>*



Most Wednesdays and Thursdays from 1966 – 1968, you could find me perched in front of our family’s old black-and-white television following the adventures of Gotham City’s Caped Crusaders. The original *Batman* television show aired two thirty-minute episodes each week. On Wednesdays, Batman and Robin would typically encounter some diabolical plot by the Joker, the Riddler, or the Penguin, and on Thursdays they’d find a way to save the city.



Almost every Wednesday night episode ended in the same way: the dynamic duo would be in a precarious situation, apparently headed toward certain destruction, and then a very dramatic voiceover would remind viewers that if we wanted to see how the storyline resolved, we’d have to tune in tomorrow – same bat time, same bat channel.

This was my introduction to the concept of a “cliffhanger” – stopping a story at a crucial instant in the drama for the sole purpose of making sure that the viewer or the reader would come back for more at a subsequent time. You’ve seen this in all kinds of ways.

I will suggest that the scripture from Mark’s Gospel this morning presents us with a cliffhanger of sorts. Here’s what I mean:



In recent episodes, we've seen Jesus come into his hometown of Nazareth and reveal himself to be the manifestation of God's power in the world. Then, he learns of and reacts to the death of John the Baptist; no doubt it is a sobering time of reflection for him as he anticipates that which is to come in his own life. He sends out the twelve, which leads directly to the feeding of the 5,000, which in turn brings about a significant confrontation with the religious authorities. All of these things must have contributed to Jesus' expressed desire to get away from the pressures of the crowds and the religious and political leadership so that he can be alone with and prepare his disciples.



We know that Jesus wanted to get away because we read that he went to a community known as Tyre. In so doing, Jesus is moving away from Jerusalem (the seat of Jewish power at that time), away from Galilee (the center of his ministry for much of the past three years) and away from the Decapolis (his previous "retreat" spot, but one wherein he'd become quite a celebrity in recent months).

We also know that Jesus wanted to get away because Mark tells us so in verse 24: "he entered a house and did not want anyone to know it."

However, Jesus' hopes to keep this retreat on the down-low appear to be immediately thwarted when he is recognized by a stranger. And this is no ordinary passer-by: the Gospel writer goes to great pains to make sure that we know that this is an encounter with an outsider. One of *them*.



¹We are told that the stranger is a *woman*. Moreover, she was a *Greek* or a *Gentile*. And she had been born in *Syrophoenicia*. The Gospel writer did everything but hang a sign on this poor woman's neck reading "not one of us".

Nevertheless, she persisted. For a man intent on finding some down time with his friends, Jesus is attracting a lot of attention. He apparently ignores the woman, but that doesn't do anything except increase the volume of her appeal. In fact, when the author of Matthew tells this story, he mentions that she is creating such a ruckus that the disciples implore Jesus to do something just to shut her up.

When he finally does engage her in conversation, Jesus apparently follows the culturally accepted rules of engagement: Jews like himself are God's favorite; Gentiles like this woman are no better than dogs in the street. A couple of weeks ago, we asked the question, "Was Jesus a jerk?", and here we see behavior that seemingly points in that direction. This conversation is cringe-worthy; particularly when we consider that it came from the same mouth that gave us the Beatitudes and the story of the Good Samaritan. What is Jesus up to here?

The accepted conclusion is that Jesus is testing this woman's faith. But why would he do this?

Is it because he enjoys seeing her crawl along and beg? Is his self-esteem so low that he needs to have this woman plead for the life of her daughter so pathetically? I can't see this as being consistent with Jesus' character.

¹ *The One With The Crumby Dog*, Ally Barrett (2017)

There are some who have suggested that the Lord went through the motions of this conversation because he hoped that it would demonstrate the foolishness of the prevailing prejudices in that culture. In essence, these people are saying that Jesus treated this woman contemptibly so that his disciples could recognize, and then reject, contempt as a basis for relationship.



I'd like to go a little further and say that Jesus was testing this woman's faith neither to satisfy his own curiosity about the woman nor to make a cultural statement about the relationships between Jews and Gentiles. I think that he was testing her faith in a public fashion in order to allow his disciples to see beyond the shadow of a doubt that her faith was authentic and her claim legitimate.

Some years ago I was in Turkey and one of my friends was looking to buy a leather jacket. When he put it on, the vendor went to great lengths to demonstrate the quality of material and workmanship. While Dan was wearing the jacket, the salesman tested it in every way: he poured water on it, he stretched the seams, and he even held a lighter under Dan's elbow to prove that this was a rugged and durable garment.

I think that Jesus was allowing this conversation with the Syrophenician woman to go on so long for precisely the same reason: he wanted to allow the disciples to conclude that this woman was indeed passionate about and beloved of God. In so doing, Jesus taught them a lesson they would not forget about the inclusive nature of the Kingdom of God.

Once her faith is demonstrated, Jesus acknowledges the woman's place in his Kingdom and announces that he has

healed her daughter. She goes home and discovers that such is indeed the case. That's the end of the story.

Um, Pastor Dave? You called this sermon "Cliffhanger." You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means... There is no cliffhanger here, Pastor Dave. Jesus comes, the woman begs, Jesus seizes a teachable moment for his disciples, a daughter is healed, and the woman goes home.

Exactly. But what happens next?

Next? There is no next. Her story is done.



²And that's the problem. The story ends with the one who began as an outsider remaining an outsider. I'm saying it's a cliffhanger because I want to know what the twelve did next. Did they reach out to her? Was she eventually included among the followers of Jesus?

I'm afraid that the answer to that must be "no". If this woman or her daughter was ever included in the body, I suspect that we'd know her name. Do you remember later in the Gospel, when the man carries the cross for Jesus, Mark tells us that he was Simon, the father of Rufus and Alexander... Lots of people who encounter Jesus are remembered – because they become part of the story. Nicodemus. Joseph of Arimathea. Mary Magdalene. Blind Bartimaeus. The fact that this woman and her daughter are still anonymous when Mark is writing the Gospel indicates to me that nobody remembers her name *now* because nobody really knew her *then*.

² *The Limits of Tyre*, Vasili Polenov (1911)

And when I read this story of Jesus healing a woman because his disciples urge him to do so in order to keep her quiet... then I'm reminded of all the times that I have "helped" someone while secretly wishing that they'd just leave. I am embarrassed by the number of times I have given some groceries or helped with a financial burden – but begrudgingly. "Here..." I say, "This is for you." And then I don't say it out loud, but the next phrase is "now leave me alone." I can't wait to get to the "mission project" and then I count the hours until it's done and I get to go home and take a shower and do what I want to do... because I am not interested in really including any of *those people* in my life.

So what's your point, Dave? What are you asking us to do?

I thought about using this passage to get myself and a least a few of you all worked up into a lather about the ways that refugees, immigrants, and asylum seekers are being treated in our nation these days. I thought about telling you the true story of a young mother who was abused and threatened and feared for her life and that of her daughter in the dangerous nation of the Democratic Republic of Congo. She was so afraid that last year she scooped up her six year-old daughter and fled to the United States, where she went directly to the immigration authorities and requested political asylum. Her case was declared valid, and she was allowed to enter the country. She followed all the rules. She was not "illegal"; she was not a terrorist. But four days after her arrival in San Diego, they took her daughter from her, slapped her in handcuffs, and sent the daughter (age 6) to a "facility" in Chicago – two thousand miles away. In the next four months, she'd have the chance to speak with this child six times.

But if the point of this message is to get you all excited about some kind of political action then, to be honest, it's less than the Gospel, and this isn't worship, it's a rally.



Here's what I think about this passage:

Don't be fooled into thinking that this story about a mother who was terrified by a situation that her family faced is an old story, or ancient history. The Gospel reading resonates with us because many of us have lived this story, and each of us has seen it.

Furthermore, let's not pretend that we can insert ourselves into the Biblical narrative and try to role-play: are you more like Jesus, or a disciple, or the woman, or her daughter? We are all over the place in that regard. And, more importantly, there's no evidence to suggest that the disciples "got" where Jesus was going with this, at least initially.

Instead, I'd like to direct your attention to the epistle reading for the day. Let's listen to Paul, who as much as anyone in the first century, was a real mover and shaker. He was a political creature – a citizen of Rome who knew how to use that identity and his passport. There *are* times where Paul seems to encourage those in leadership and authority to do what is right. But when he spoke to a real live church, he didn't tell them to sit down and write a bunch of letters to Nero or to seek to overthrow the Roman garrisons in Thessalonica or Philippi.

No, he spoke very plainly. Remember who you are, who you were, and who you will be. Encourage one another, and strengthen each other. Encourage those who are afraid. Help the weak. Be patient with everyone. Always try to do good for each other and for everyone.

Look: I'm not here to put the badmouth on political action in the name of the Gospel. If you want to write the President about immigration or the governor about abortion, well, knock yourself out. But just don't be an activist without any action.

Listen: in two weeks, the Cross Trainers camp will start here in Crafton Heights. There will be 60 young people coming in and out of our buildings for six weeks. Some of them are in a great place. Others are in a world of hurt. Most of them, if you give them half a chance, will get on your last nerve.

Re-read the Gospel for today, and then ask yourself: do these kids *really* belong here? Is this church for them and for their families? Is there grace and hope and love and acceptance and guidance and challenge for *them* here?

If so... how will they know? Because we're paying half a dozen people like Carly and Katie to be nice to them for a few weeks this summer? Will they be authentically included in the purposes of God because we "let" them show up here and we're nice to them for a few hours? Or is there a deeper response that might be indicated on our part?

It's a cliffhanger.

When I watched Batman, I had to wait an entire day to see how he and Robin solved the problem. When it comes to discipleship, I'd suggest that the true measure of our faithfulness is whether the young people who are here this summer will be remembered by and connected with the community of faith in ten years. What can *we* do about *that*?

Stay tuned.