

*Siblings in Christ...*

**The preacher for the closing convocation was Harold Kurtz, a retired Presbyterian missionary who'd spent much of his adult life serving internationally, including in remote settings in Ethiopia.<sup>1</sup>**

As he paced in front of the assembly, his penetrating eyes—like that of a hawk—held you tight, as he shared powerful stories of how the gospel serves as a catalyst of transformation in each culture it encounters.

**At the heart of his sermon was an experience Harold had while working in a region called MAJI with a people who sat at the bottom rung of the ladder, ethnically, culturally, and economically, in the country of Ethiopia.**

These are people of the land, Harold told us, who stay as far away from the modern world as they can and are often treated like second-class citizens by their fellow countrymen.

When they come into market and want to buy something to drink, they are forbidden from drinking out of a glass like all other customers. Instead, they must bring a leaf and it is into that leaf that the market vendor pours the drink.

Harold had an opportunity to visit a Maji settlement and meet with the people who'd been learning the gospel story. At the gathering, a man from the community rose to speak.

**LOOK AT ME!** he told Harold.

And pointing to himself, he asked:

IS THIS THE FACE OF A DOG? IS MY FACE LIKE THAT OF AN ANIMAL?

IS NOT MY FACE A HUMAN FACE?

ARE NOT MY EYES AND EARS AND NOSE THOSE OF A HUMAN BEING?

YET, said the man, WE ARE TREATED LIKE DOGS.

**BUT I AM LEARNING THAT THERE IS ONE WHO DOES NOT SEE ME AS A DOG—BUT AS HIS CHILD.**

**I AM LEARNING THAT IN THE HEART OF GOD I AM WORTHY OF LOVE.**

**I cannot hear today's story from MARK'S GOSPEL without hearing the voice of that Maji man.**

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<sup>1</sup> I heard Harold preach at the closing worship service of the Good Shepherd School Reunion, held at the Rocky Mtn Conference Center in Estes Park, Colorado, in Summer 2006. Good Shepherd School was a school for missionary children located in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Fresh from his debate with the Pharisees about what makes one pure and holy, Jesus sets out alone from Jewish territory and heads for Gentile territory, for the region of Tyre, on the Mediterranean coast...

**... HOPING—Mark suggests—for a few days of silent retreat away from the pressures and demands of ministry; a few days where **NO ONE KNOWS WHO HE IS OR WHERE HE IS**.**

But instead of SOLITUDE, what Jesus gets is INTERRUPTION.

Jesus, who doesn't want to see another face, finds himself face-to-face with a woman who falls at his feet and begs him to heal her daughter.

Now let's slow down the story a bit...long enough to point out that this woman has four strikes against her even before she begins:

**FIRST** – Jesus doesn't want to see her—or anybody for that matter.

**SECOND** – she is a woman, and the rules of the culture prohibit women from talking with men who are outside of the family.

**THIRD** - she's a nameless nobody while Jesus has a growing reputation as a healer and rabbi.

**FINALLY** - she is a non-Jew—not a child of Israel, not a child of the promise.

Clearly this woman has no business intruding on Jesus and making demands! Who would do such a thing?!

But her little girl is dreadfully ill, and for her sake this mother will do anything.

**By now, in Mark's gospel, we know the pattern**; we know what to expect from Jesus in a situation like this:

- That he'll hear the woman out,
- grant her request,
- demonstrate God's mercy,
- and send the woman on her way. Right?

**But that's not what happens here. Instead, Jesus' response is a complete and utter rebuff!**

THE CHILDREN MUST BE FED FIRST. FOR IT'S NOT FAIR TO TAKE THE CHILDREN'S FOOD AND THROW IT TO THE DOGS.

After a putdown like that it's easy to imagine the woman slinking away from that house humiliated and ashamed—kicking herself for thinking that Jesus would be different than the others.

**But if the Syrophoenician woman is caught off guard she sure doesn't show it.**

**Without missing a beat she meets his gaze.**

YOU MAY THINK THAT MY FACE IS THE FACE OF A DOG, says she,  
BUT EVEN DOGS UNDER THE TABLE HAVE THE RIGHT  
TO THE CHILDREN'S CRUMBS.

**In every other encounter with every other person recorded in the gospels, Jesus wins the debate.**

**But in this 7th chapter of Mark, this Syrophoenician mother bests him.**

**And Jesus... is... changed. His NO becomes a YES.**

**FOR SAYING THAT, he tells her, YOU MAY GO.  
THE DEMON HAS LEFT YOUR DAUGHTER.**

This episode, to borrow language from Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, is "an epiphany of the face," where a person "looks at me, calls out to me, claims me."<sup>2</sup>

It's what happened to Harold Kurtz that day when the MAJI man demanded that Harold look into his face.

It's what will happen to us when we look long enough and deep enough into the faces of those we meet each day, until we can say:

**BEHOLD—A CHILD OF GOD! BEHOLD ONE WORTHY OF LOVE!**

"Jesus, face to face with [a] woman who presses him to recognize her claim on his care, reveals [this] "interruption" as the inbreaking of God's will, the [surprising] gift...of the uninvited."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See Isaac Villegas, *Our Borrowed Life*, in the Sept/Oct 2021 print issue of *Sojourners*, p. 48.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

**Over the last year and a half we've gotten used to not seeing each other.**

But the JOY that attends the reunions of parents and children, grandparents and grandchildren—and us, too—who are able now to be PHYSICALLY PRESENT to one another, to LOOK into one another's faces and experience that PULL, that CLAIM—this JOY TESTIFIES to the primacy of personal presence.

The story of the encounter between Jesus and the Syrophenician woman could easily have been tossed out by the early church as an unfavorable portrayal of the one they had come to know as their Lord and Savior. But it wasn't.

Instead the story was remembered and passed on. And thank God it was!

For in this story we witness a Lord who, because of the woman's claim, came to understand the reach of God's mercy and justice that much more clearly.

And if we, dear Siblings, can watch our Lord expand his understanding of how far GOOD NEWS is intended to reach, can we not imagine ourselves becoming a people of even broader acceptance and compassion and forbearance and welcome?

**Friends, what does this world of ours need more of?**

More people who call each other DOGS?

Or more people who care enough to look into the face of the Other, and behold a child of God; a person worthy of love?

Amen.