

**St John United Church of Christ**  
**Rev. Barbara Lohrbach**  
**September 10, 2006**

**Mark 7:24-30 Persistence and Perseverance**

I am glad to be a woman of the 21<sup>st</sup> century for lots of reasons. One--I can get by with wearing slacks any time I choose. I don't have to wear a dress unless I want to do so. There was a time when women wearing pants was a no-no.

Who was the first woman to wear pants in a movie? Katherine Hepburn  
Who was the first woman to wear pants in a public place? Amelia Jenks Bloomer

To call that first garment pants or slacks would be a stretch. Nonetheless—it was a radical move for Amelia and the woman who designed the pantaloons and knee length skirt that became known as "bloomers"—Elizabeth Smith Miller. Elizabeth Smith Miller might not be remembered today had she not defied societal norms of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and been persistent. We'll come back to Bloomer and Miller, but let's look at another woman from scripture who defied societal norms...whose persistence is noted in this lesson from the gospel according to Mark.

Scripture tells us that Jesus is in the region of Tyre and has gone into a house. This woman, who knows he is there, comes to him, asking for healing for her daughter. Jesus' response is not what we expect. What's going on?

Although it is tempting to read scripture as historical accounts, scholars know that Mark was written about 4 decades after Jesus and was relying on oral tradition—stories from those who claimed to have known Jesus, stories that were known throughout the early church even before they were written down.

This passage places Jesus in the largely Gentile region of Tyre—a place and a people the Jews despised in that day and not without cause. Jesus goes into a house and doesn't want anyone to know he is there. The writer of Mark portrays Jesus as the "secret Messiah", and often has Jesus shunning the crowds when visiting a house, heightening the sense of secrecy. Yet this woman hears about Jesus and seeks him out. Her daughter needs healing...she does what any mother would do...she finds this miracle man in spite of the risk.

She does two things that give her some credibility—she comes to Jesus in a home, not a public place and her behavior shows deference to the man, she kneels at his feet. But she has approached a strange man without an escort and that is not

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allowed in her ancient world. And the clincher--she is a Gentile of a different nationality. When she asks...no, she begs...for Jesus to heal her daughter, he refuses.

"Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair for to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Jesus is telling this woman that he is here for the Jews and that to do as she asks would be the same as taking the children's food and throwing it to the dogs. She hears the insult...to be called a dog isn't a good thing. But she doesn't walk away. She is respectful, calls him, "Sir"...but she persists—"Even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Jesus tells her to go home, the demon has left her daughter.

So what just happened here? Why is this story part of the Gospel of Mark? If you read the whole of this gospel, it becomes clear that the writer really believes in this Jesus...in Jesus' power to heal and to do miraculous things, in Jesus' ability to transform human life, in this God that Jesus claimed was love. The writer wants the reader to believe as well.

This rejection of a Gentile woman and the change Jesus makes may have also been part of the message that Mark wanted to convey—that Jesus' message is for all—Gentile and Jew alike.

No credit is given to the woman's faith. Jesus simply says, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." "For saying that"—No proclamation of belief, no repetition of creed, nothing except a reminder that even dogs get the crumbs. "For saying that"—Jesus is confronted with one who risked her reputation by acting in ways not acceptable for well-behaved women of her day. "For saying that"—a blessing was given, a daughter was healed.

I began today with a trivial example about the fact that I can wear pants any time I want to do so. The truth is that the women who blazed that trail for me and for many would not see their persistence as trivial. Amelia Bloomer was a suffragette. Her goal in 1838 was not to be able to wear the pants in her family—her goal was to gain for the women of the United States, the right to vote...the right to be counted as a full citizen. Elizabeth Smith Miller, a suffragette, may have put together that first design for pantaloons, but she also was an abolitionist whose home was a station on the underground railroad.

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It took women like Amelia Bloomer and Elizabeth Miller, Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and the women who followed them over 60 years to fulfill their dream of voting. Like the Syrophenician women, it took persistence, it took courage, it took standing up to the name-calling of their hostile world, it took demanding that their voices be heard, it took saying that over and over and over.

Throughout history, people of every time and every place have summoned the persistence and courage to be heard and to say over and over "we may be dogs, but even the dogs get the crumbs the children leave behind." Many have chosen to risk their reputation as well-behaved women to speak out against injustice and oppression.

One such woman is Jeannine Gramick, a Roman Catholic nun, who for the past 30 years has been an outspoken advocate for gays and lesbians in the Catholic church. She helped found New Ways Ministries in Washington, D. C. as a national advocacy group for the acceptance of gays and lesbians in the Catholic Church. In 1999 she was censured and the ministry closed. Sr. Gramick continues to be outspoken and to work for these issues.

Had she been quiet and well-behaved, keeping her vows of poverty, charity and obedience—we would have never heard of this incredible woman.

"For saying that" Sr. Gramick sacrificed her reputation and her life's work as a nun. "For saying that" Sr. Gramick has offered healing and new life to many who were rejected as the outcasts of the church.

We look around our world today and think the problems are too big. We look around and see that the dragons are too fierce. We come to the church for respite and rest. We come to the church and we say, "Feed us God for we have been faithful."

There stands a woman who has too many children and too many husbands, and appears to be faithless. There stands a man whose accent and faith proclaim him as other than Christian. There stand two men who love one another deeply. There stand the homeless, the prisoner, and the foreigner. All of these stand with their fists clenched saying, "Yes, we may be dogs, but even the dogs get the crumbs that fall from the table." Dare I say that we treat our dogs better than we do some

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people in our world. "For saying that"...some may condemn me. "For saying that"...others may be blessed.

Oh, mortal, what does the Lord require of you? To do justice...to love kindness...to walk humbly with your God. To do that—to say that...we will need the persistence, the determination, and the courage of this ill-mannered woman from Syrophenicia.

To do that—to say that, we go with the courage and strength of our God, for nothing can separate us from the love of the God known to us in Jesus.

We can speak. We can be persistent. We can have courage to do so. How? God will make the way when there seems to be no way.

Thanks be to God.