

Jesus, the Woman, and Their Encounter in a Border Region

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Mark 7:24–30 (ESV)

24 And from there he arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And he entered a house and did not want anyone to know, yet he could not be hidden. 25 But immediately a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit heard of him and came and fell down at his feet. 26 Now the woman was a Gentile, a Syrophenician by birth. And she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. 27 And he said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." 28 But she answered him, "Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." 29 And he said to her, "For this statement you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter." 30 And she went home and found the child lying in bed and the demon gone.

Introduction

This encounter takes place outside of Jewish territory, between Galilee, Tyre, and Sidon. One could compare this location to the border areas of our Latin American countries (such as the area between Paraguay and Brazil) where there are cultural, religious, political, and economic conflicts whose implications are different from those of conflicts in the cities of the nation's interior. In these border areas, goods are cheap and commerce flows from both sides, rules are imposed, power hierarchies are established, and neighboring countries watch the borders with passionate interest. This is the reality today in Latin America. People attempting to cross over the border without migration documents are sent back to their countries; they are *campesinos*, migrants, refugees, displaced people who we shoved out to the margins. They are without land, the excluded

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ones. There is no place for them in our countries; they are squatting under the table.

Here, too, in this symbolic place are the women. And here, we also find Jesus, who has moved out of the center, away from the capital city to the borderlands, where whatever happens to him has special meaning and relevance.

The whole text moves through this border area between countries. Now we will examine three moments in that text.

First Moment: Verses 24–26

Jesus goes into a house, but he doesn't want to be seen, because this is not his territory—things could go badly for him if he is discovered. But he cannot go unnoticed, because a woman who doesn't want to remain in hiding comes forward. She dares to break social rules, and overcomes shame and the honor code: she goes to the forbidden place and enters the house. It's well known that conversation between men and women is prohibited in public—it's considered immodest, even perverse—but she bravely breaks with negative cultural values and the boundaries demarcating the masculine and the feminine.

Let's examine who this woman is and what drives her. In the first place, her name is not mentioned. It's said that she is Greek, Syrophenician by birth. Probably like some of us she's a mother of boys and girls and perhaps, since no husband or partner is mentioned, she's also the head of a household. She begs a Jewish man for help even though she is not Jewish and she knows Jesus's power to heal only by hearsay. But she has the power of boldness because of her special and extremely important petition—that Jesus drive out the demon that possesses her daughter. Similarly, many of us Latin American women have come to Jesus in search of help and deliverance from our suffering, our unsatisfied needs, our endless struggles.

The first lesson this woman leaves us is her decision to break with the limits imposed by culture and religion. She does not remain passive, just praying inside the church. She dares to act with courage; she dares to throw off her culture's restraints regarding social relationships and to use the power of the word. She overcomes these mandates that had made her invisible. This Syrophenician woman shows no fear in taking a risk; she's audacious and bold—attitudes that our societies have attributed to men. She recognizes who Jesus is, and her purpose in connecting with him is to pursue and secure the well-being and health of her daughter. Her deep maternal love drives her to challenge and break the limits and the patterns of authority.

We have done the same in this First Gathering of Latin American Mennonite Women Theologians held as a part of the Mennonite World

Conference assembly. For us, to arrive at this moment here today has meant, among other things, to cross borders, listen to women's stories, break traditional patterns, and challenge structures.

In order to arrive at this point, we had to redefine our role as women theologians: it was necessary to be inclusive and recognize each one's ministries, vocations, and calls but not without encouraging and challenging each other to get biblical and theological training to help us open our minds to a better understanding of our challenges and commitments.

Second Moment: Verses 27–28

In this passage, we find the heart of the text, the central challenge. In Jesus's view, the mission is clear—to come to the people of Israel. He uses a metaphor—the table laden with food—and it's clear from it whom he has come to serve. The woman responds that this is true but it's also true that crumbs fall from the table and that under the table are the dogs who are eating the falling crumbs. Through her persistence, she bursts into and breaks open Jesus's thinking:

- His paradigm, his model, undergoes a change. The woman states: "I'm under the table, those crumbs are mine, and you can't take them from me. It doesn't matter if they are under the table."
- In spite of the exclusion, what falls from the table is hers. She takes it as a right. This declaration moves away from an attitude of resignation and humiliation; it requires strength and energy; she has a healing mission manifested by her power to be able to reject [Jesus's initial answer]. The most relevant thing for her at this moment is the life of her daughter—to heal her, to protect her. Life itself is at stake; there are no boundaries, no missions, there is nothing. If life is at risk, that trumps all.²

Third Moment: Verses 29–30

For such a reply... The miracle happens, there is good news and a renewed way of thinking [*pensamientos de vida*]. Jesus stands transformed, evangelized, and the woman is empowered. Coming into dialog with Jesus makes the impossible possible. The woman returns to her home but not with empty hands. She returns to her world, her reality, her daily life, her church, her mission. She returns different, transformed, happy for having found a Jewish man who

² Silvia Regina de Lima Silva, "Transgresión y proclamación en la tierra de frontera," *Revista Con-spirando* 43 (May 2003): 24.

makes her inner transformation possible. She liberates herself, she liberates Jesus, and her daughter is healed. Jesus has his own experience of liberation and conversion because of this encounter. He widens his vision and mission in border spaces.

The woman enlarges her understanding of God as a God of solidarity, a God who moves in the border spaces and under the table. Jesus grows as a man toward a new masculinity, sensitized to patriarchal dynamics. This new vision of masculinity—different from that of his own time and emerging from his experience and encounter with the other [*la otra*]³—transforms him, as all genuine encounters between men and women of God do.³

Key Points for Our Work and Commitment:

- Wherever we find ourselves, we need to continue working with women and proclaiming freedom in their lives.
- We need to question the status quo that enslaves and deforms women's lives. As Christians, we talk about healthy, wholesome doctrine. How can there be churches with wholesome doctrine if women don't have access to leadership or biblical-theological training, if we are silenced, made invisible, and excluded from the community? Everything that binds us and enslaves us needs to be revised because it produces sickness, slavery, fear, and drives us away from God.
- Gabriel García Márquez's book *Of Love and Other Demons*⁴ tells the story of a little girl who has suffered a series of ordeals throughout her short life. Because her behavior doesn't fit into accepted norms, she is continually tortured to expel the supposed demon, a process that finally kills her. García Márquez says, "Sometimes we attribute to the devil certain things we do not understand, without considering that these might be things we don't understand about God."⁵
- Sometimes we interpret the presence of God in women's work as demonic. It makes us afraid, so we demonize it because we don't understand it.
- It's important to break barriers and create new gender relationships among us and between women and men. We must nurture friendship and solidarity among women; we must recognize, congratulate, and promote each other as capable and competent. We must transform

³ Silva, "Transgresión y proclamación en la tierra de frontera," 24.

⁴ Gabriel García Márquez, *Del amor y otros demonios* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1994).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

ourselves as well as our families and children.

- Walking in the social borderlands allows us to be transformed and challenged. We ourselves will be healed, and we will heal others because we'll be able to see with new eyes and share a new blessing. May the Lord laugh with our joy! Let's celebrate life together!

Amen.