



**WHEN INTERRUPTIONS OCCUR**  
**Mark 7:24-37**

Every homemaker, school teacher, pastor, executive, or administrator knows the importance of setting up schedules and blocking out time to be sure we are not interrupted. We do so to finish the task or goal that has been set for us. We do not want to be sidetracked from completing the major project in front of us. We try to find a balance of being available to others – but completing our tasks as well.

The late priest and spiritual writer Father Henri Nouwen once shared how an important insight came to him while trying to live out this balancing act. He tried to fulfill his ministry obligations until one day the Holy Spirit revealed to him that the interruptions that came into his life were his place of ministry and mission. This same dynamic pulsates from our lesson today.

Jesus knows that his time is short. He must fulfill his first priority of bringing restoration to Israel – and then to the rest of the world. He needs to feed the children first. Judging from his encounters with the Pharisees in the lesson before this – he had a lot of work to do. The disciples themselves weren't ready. He did not want to be distracted from his priority of training the disciples.

One of the reasons Jesus had come to this remote spot was to teach his disciples and avoid arrest. Time was of the essence. In **verse 24** it shares: "He entered a house there where he didn't think he would be found – but he couldn't escape notice." (**THE MESSAGE**) Jesus is interrupted – and a profound lesson of ministry and mission is shared with us.

From **verse 26** we learn a woman approaches Jesus as a foreigner in the eyes of the disciples.

However, she leaves from this interruption as a woman who impresses Jesus with the depth of her faith and the tenacity of her hope. She does not come because she is worthy – but because she knows that Jesus – the Master – is worthy.

One of the major distinctions between Jews and Gentiles were their strict dietary codes. Because others races and cultures do not practice these rules – they are considered 'unclean.' Into this mix you throw years and centuries of racial hatred and disdain – and you have some deep-seated differences between people. To make

matters worse – Jesus had just taught the Pharisees that what makes a person clean is not what is their stomachs or hands – but what is in their hearts. This was quite a jolt.

What Jesus sees in this woman that so deeply impresses him is what is in her heart. He sees the depth of love, the tenacity of hope, and the bold commitment of a mother for her daughter. He sees that her heart is contrite. The disciples were getting an important lesson that faith has nothing to do with birthright, geography, religious purity and orthodoxy. She is willing to surrender all that she has – except her tenacity of hope. This woman refuses to be a victim.

Steve Covey shares:

**“If we believe ourselves to be victims, we become victims to justify our belief. If we believe ourselves to be responsible and capable, we become responsible and capable to justify our belief. And in both cases, we reap the results – or the excuses – that our attitudes create for us.”<sup>1</sup>**

This woman refuses to accept what others think she is and she eventually reaps the benefits of her conviction.

Hope has a power and life all its own that defies all powers and odds. She refuses to swallow what the world has said about her – and her value to God.

She knows that if there is going to be a Messiah – a Redeemer – it must be for all the world. Perhaps she has read from the Septuagint (the Greek version of the Old Testament) of **Isaiah 49:6**, “I will also make you a light for the Gentiles that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.” Sometimes it is hard to accept the truth of the Bible. What surprises the disciples is – instead of scolding her for this untimely interruption – Jesus engages this dear soul in conversation. During the course of this conversation – which appears downright provocative at times – Jesus is able to move beyond her words and lips – to her heart. I believe Jesus was giving the disciples – and us – a first hand, real life example of what he taught in **verses 1-23**. They had to be able to see God at work in the world in others – beyond their narrow traditions.

The late Mother Teresa in her work shares “reconciliation begins first, not with others, but with ourselves. It starts with having a clean heart within. A clean heart is able to see God in others. We must radiate God’s love.”<sup>2</sup>

So Jesus was looking for some moments of much-needed spiritual refreshment – a change of scenery so to speak. It is this context in which this interruption takes place – and this important lesson in ministry and mission is shared. Eugene Peterson believes “this story tells about Christ’s redemptive rule. They are flashes of insight into the kingdom of God. They are windows into the way things are done in God’s kingdom – the place where everything is done well.”<sup>3</sup>

A dear parishioner once asked me, “Pastor, how did she know to seek him?” I said, “There is something in Jesus that simply draws all men and women to himself.” The creation story teaches us that we are made in the image of God. As our opening Hymn shared “All that hath life and breath, come now with praises before him.” It further shares – “surely his goodness and mercy here daily attend Thee.”<sup>4</sup>

Yes, like Jonah you can try to run and hide and even diminish and impoverish your soul by not having faith in Jesus – but you cannot hide Jesus. He is simply woven into life and civilization. Here we see so powerfully the prevenient grace of God at work. Right smack in the middle of racism, classism, and harmful religious traditions – God is at work drawing all men and women to himself. This fact could no longer be hid.

Jesus was giving a foretaste of the Great Commission and Pentecost whereby the church will be empowered to preach and equip us to take the gospel to all the nations. In our own nation where the scares of racism and classism still distort our land and far too many of our churches – I hope our own stereotypes are being challenged today. Jesus cannot be hid in the institutional church where our own traditions cover him with a vague theism and errand-boy mentality.

This story is hard for us to understand because there had to be a lot of non-verbal or body language that went on between Jesus and this woman. Non-verbal cues are crucial in any exchange. In a sense you go on with a different language – the language of the heart. This story clearly teaches us that encounters with Jesus may often surprise us and at times even offend us. Thankfully, this woman is a testimony to both of these realities.

Now, remember the Bible teaches us “**to seek the Lord while he may be found. Call upon him while he is near.**” Now, that is exactly what this woman does.

She cries out. We know from the book of Exodus and the Psalms that God hears the cries of all people. How easy it is for us to forget this – unless it is our cry. I love the old gospel hymn that we used to sing more frequently, **PASS ME NOT, O GENTLE**

**SAVIOR:**            Pass me not, O gentle Savior,  
                                  Hear my humble cry;  
                                  While on others thou art calling,  
                                  Do not pass me by.

That is exactly the dynamic that is happening in this episode today.

Now, this poor soul has three strikes against her. She came from all the wrong places – and all the wrong races, and all the wrong faith traditions, and the lower sex group to boot. She is a foreigner. She is not Jewish. She probably had some contact with the pagan gods. And to top it off a woman was never to speak to a Rabbi in public. She was outside their covenant community. She is a most unlikely candidate to pursue Jesus.

Now, we come to the difficult part of the lesson to understand. In **verse 27**, Jesus responds in a way which is not entirely encouraging and can be seen as defensive or provocative. He responds by saying, **“First let the children eat all they want for it is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.”** Jesus did not ignore her – but it was hardly a Kodak moment. I believe Jesus is finding out what is in this woman’s heart. Notice that while Jesus does not open the door all the way, he at least keeps the door partially open. Perhaps he could ascertain if her intentions were really motivated by love and sacrifice.

In **verse 28** she answers Jesus by saying, “Yes, Lord, but even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” If there was any doubt about the cleanliness of this woman’s motives and heart they are all erased here.

She does not dispute the fact that Jesus first has a special mission to the Jews – but she knows that Jesus Christ alone has the ability to meet the deepest needs and longings of her soul and spirit.

One of my professors at Drew Seminary shared that this is the only argument in the New Testament that Jesus seems to lose. However, I believe Jesus was not trying to win an argument – but to seek the attitude and direction of her heart and mind. Perhaps he loses the argument to teach the disciples - and us – a much deeper and greater truth – his love for all the world and all its people.

In the latter part of **verse 25** it shares “She fell at his feet.” In **verse 28** she calls him Lord. One of the first persons to recognize that Jesus is the Lord and Christ of God is a female foreigner. His real identity was not hid from her. The disciples and Pharisees do not fare as well. This woman teaches us that our God is a God of mercy.

When I preached on Matthew’s version of this story a few years ago found in **chapter 15:21-28**, I shared with you that I knew the power of this story and its truth long before I became a preacher and was required to preach on this challenging text. I was raised in a Methodist church with monthly Lord’s Supper celebrations. Every month I recited these words which we called **“The Prayer of Humble Access to the Lord’s Table”**: “We do not presume to come to this Thy table, O Merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in Thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under Thy table. But Thou art the same Lord, whose property is always to have mercy.”<sup>5</sup> The testimony of this woman and the truth that pulsates from this lesson could not be forgotten or hidden. There is a reason the Holy Spirit made sure this story made its way into the sacred scriptures.

The next time we sing the song **“Let us Break Bread Together”** be reminded what a revolutionary thing God has allowed us to be a part of.

This text teaches us that when we approach God with a broken and contrite heart, we can experience the healing power of God as well.

My friend Tom Butts is absolutely right on when he shares, “There is great power in a faith – that holds onto hope – even when the ground upon which you stand is wet with tears.” Sometimes it is said that, “the best plant and strongest trees grow in the most barren and difficult of soils.” Yes, with the power of our Resurrection Hope – we should never allow despair to put us down, or to push us aside. Don’t swallow the truth that we are victims. Despair can come into our lives – but it should not take over our lives. This woman does not allow despair to have the last word.

I am thankful for this story – for it teaches me that greater than the powers of hatred and racism – is the power of God’s radical grace. That is a message which needs to interrupt our lives – and the life of the institutional church – all the time.

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz  
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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Steve Covey, **SEVEN HABITS OF HIGHLY EFFECTIVE PEOPLE**, Simon and Schuster, 1990.

<sup>2</sup> Mother Teresa, **THE JOY OF LIVING**, March 4<sup>th</sup> devotion, Penguin Books, 1997, page 104.

<sup>3</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, **CONVERSATIONS: The Message Bible with it’s translator,** NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO, 2007, page 1556.

<sup>4</sup> These words are from the hymn, **“Praise To The Lord, The Almighty.”** Written by Joachin Neander.

<sup>5</sup> I further learned when I attended Drew Theological Seminary from Dr. Bard Thompson that this prayer is from our Anglican heritage; it is usually attributed to Archbishop Crammer, who was influenced by St. Thomas Aquinas.