

"LOSING THE ARGUMENT  
MARK 7: 24-30

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University Church of Chicago  
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In Gail Godwin's novel, **The Finishing School**, one character, Ursula, instructs the narrator, Justin:

"There are two kinds of people," she once decreed to me emphatically. "One kind you can tell by just looking at them at what point they congealed into their final selves. It might be a very **nice** self, but you know you can expect no more surprises from it. Whereas the other kind keeps moving, changing. With these people you can never say, 'X stops here,' or 'Now I know all there is to know about Y.' That doesn't mean they're unstable. Ah, no, far from it. They are **fluid**. They keep moving forward and making new trysts with life, and the motion of it keeps them young. In my opinion, they are the only people who are still alive. You must be constantly on your guard, Justin, against congealing."

Urusula's marvelous insight gives us a fresh way of looking not only at people but at events, at decisions we make and fail to make.

One of America's best poets, Lisel Mueller, has expressed something of the same truth in a poem, "Why We Tell Stories":

. . .  
We sat by the fire in our caves,  
and because we were poor, we made up a tale  
about a treasure mountain  
that would open only for us

and because we were always defeated,  
we invited impossible riddles  
only we could solve,  
monsters only we could kill,  
women who could love no one else

and because we had survived  
sisters and brothers, daughters and sons,  
we discovered bones that rose  
from the dark earth and sang

as white birds in the trees

Because the story of our life  
becomes our life

Because each of us tells  
the same story  
but tells it differently  
and none of us tells it  
the same way twice

Because grandmothers looking like spiders  
want to enchant the children  
and grandfathers need to convince us  
what happened happened because of them

and though we listen only  
haphazardly with one ear,  
we will begin our story  
with the word **and**

Ms. Godwin's warning about congealing gives us a fresh way of looking at worship and the church, and, as Walter Brueggemann points out, at the Bible. "The live Word of God resists our congealing, in life and in interpretation. That does not mean interpretation is unstable. It means, rather, that we may continue to expect surprises and can never say, 'Now I know all about the text.'"

The strange story that Mark tells of Jesus' encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman bristles with problems for us modern Christians. Jesus journeys to a Gentile area but does not want to help the people there; though he is a master of demons and nature, he is not able to secure the privacy he wants; in this text he is able to heal at a distance, but elsewhere his personal presence and contact are necessary; he is reluctant to heal, though he can do so without difficulty at a distance; Jesus uses abusive language that might seem both racist and sexist, then changes his mind on the basis of a sharp retort from the Gentile woman.

Though the word "faith" is not found in this story, Matthew in his version is certainly right in designating it a story of persistent faith. The woman comes to Jesus and asks him to heal her daughter. Because she is a Gentile, he adamantly refuses. If you have been infected with the traditional, post-Nicene Creed paradox of

understanding Jesus—that is, that he is completely divine as well as completely human--then you are going to have trouble with this story. Mark's depiction is of a Jesus who is a growing and developing human being who changed his mind on various issues and that key encounters with significant woman, from Mary his mother onwards, influenced his developing perspectives.

Thus, this woman's faith and persistence persuades Jesus to do something he initially was not going to do. The story stands in a biblical tradition in which God has a plan for people and history but is persuaded to change the divine plan by dialogue with persistent human beings. Moreover, the plan often has to do with the role of the non-Jewish world in God's plan. Mark knows of a divine plan for history, but God revises it en route. This story is not about an incident in the biography of Jesus so much as it has to do with God's plan for history.

Who among us hasn't known like the Gentile woman the agony of waiting, the longing for things to turn out the way we expected, the hope that our long-postponed dreams will finally come true? Who among us doesn't know the barrenness that eats at our souls because we wanted and waited and were never fulfilled in exactly the way we had anticipated? If we ourselves are not bitter about life's mysteries, we certainly run up against people every day whose vitriol spills into our lives.

What do you and I want from life? When all the pleasures and pursuits are reduced to their essence, when all the friendships and relationships are melted down to their core, when we stop counting the money and regretting the wasted time, what is ultimate? And how do we know?

There is always this desperate need guiding our lives, isn't there? So, when the gift is offered, the gift that satisfies, that answers our deepest desires, we are amazed by its grace. That's the story the Bible tells over and over again. Need answered by grace. Bitterness washed away by fulfillment. Barrenness impregnated with new hope.

The woman does not know for certain where her future lies, but she certainly does not want to live without her daughter. She has waited for this moment. Just like us: when we were young, we waited to graduate from high school, then we knew a degree would send us out to conquer the world, then another degree was needed. Still we waited for success. We strove for it, that elusive approval, status, the place at the top. Then, when we felt secure

and safe, we had to look around and protect ourselves, hoard our money, afraid it was going to disappear.

In an article in the New Yorker, Claudia Roth Pierpont reviewed the second volume of Doris Lessing's autobiography, **Walking in the Shade**, which parallels her novel, **The Golden Notebook**, which many critics view as the book that really launched the feminist movement. Ms. Pierpont describes Anna Wulf, the heroine of the novel as "a fully self-conscious specimen of the 'position of women in our time,'" but also as one of those neurotic people--undistinguished by gender--"who has found her way down from the attic to the bedroom only to stand fumbling for decades with the next set of keys."

What an apt description of so many of us! Like the Syro-Phoenician woman, like Anna Wulf, we carry our scars and we are attracted to scarred, brooding people whose monstrous desires shape us into people we do not want to be. Until we come to ourselves, until we put our trust not in such momentary passions but in God.

Remember Emily in Thornton Wilder's "Our Town," when she poignantly asks, "Will we always be at the mercy of one momentary passion after another?"

Human beings suffer from a deep insecurity that pushes us to create rules that give status and value to some while disparaging others. In the first century the poor, the infirm, the orphaned, the mentally ill, the alien and many women lived with very low status. Here we are two thousand years later, after lying on psychiatrists' couches and reading Freud and Jung and Menninger and Rogers, and our insecurities have not dimmed. Many of the poor, the infirm, the mentally ill and the alien still live at the margins of society.

We are no more inclined to forgiveness than those benighted people of Jesus time were. We prefer long prison sentences and harsh religious judgment for those who stray from our secular laws and religious morals. There continues to be a sense that if people end up homeless or on drugs, they are weak and at fault. Our world teaches us to shun the dirty, smelly woman ranting on the number 22 Clark Street bus. Countless children spend empty, abused lives shuttled from one foster home to the next--forgotten and unloved. We tolerate the so-called "rendition" of Muslims who are blindfolded, humiliated and tortured because they have different beliefs and dress strangely.

Mark Edmundson has written a book entitled **Nightmare On Main Street**, a study of why Americans love Gothic tales of angels, sadomasochism and horror. One reason concerns the decline of our faith in a benevolent, active God. "There is something to gain," he writes, "in accepting the harsh belief that the world is infested with evil, that all power is corrupt, all humanity debased, and that there is nothing we can do about it....We recover something of what is lost with the withdrawal of God from the day-to-day world."

That is certainly not the view the Bible has, nor the understanding of those of us who have experienced the power of God to answer our prayers--albeit not always as we expected. Not only is Jesus' mind changed by this encounter, but it is also expanded as he blesses the woman, grants her heart's desire and heals her daughter. However unsettling this exchange may be, its resolution reveals that God is not unchanging or unresponsive but compassionate and merciful.

I stand with this Gentile woman whose prayers were answered, and who lived, as we all do, alongside the "not yet," waiting for the "already that has come in Jesus the Christ."