

Sermon: How Does That Feel?
Mark: Mark 7:24-37
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Context: WWPC
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He said to her, 'Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.'

Mark 7:27

Everyone's a little bit racist, sometimes.

Let me hasten to add that this distressing pronouncement does not come from me. It's one of the go to lines from the hit Broadway musical Avenue Q. Here's the fuller version--and I'll have mercy on you and read it, rather than sing it:

*Everyone's a little bit racist, sometimes.
Doesn't mean we go around committing hate crimes.
Look around and you will find,
No one's really color-blind.
Maybe it's a fact we all should face.
Everyone makes judgments based on race.*

In live performances, the song tends to elicit a low-level giggle from the audience, in part because, like all the songs in Avenue Q, it is performed by puppets.

But also, I suspect, because on some deep, personal level audiences know it's more true than they would ever admit publicly: everyone is a little bit racist sometimes.

If that makes you uncomfortable, I'm afraid I have some bad news for you. If the story that Anne and Jamie told for us today is to be believed, even Jesus is not exempt from this distressing claim.

A woman comes to him because her baby girl is sick. She's heard the stories about how this man, this remarkable man, can work wonders. She believes these stories. She believes he has the power to heal her daughter.

The only problem is she has no right coming anywhere near Jesus. She knows this. She knows perfectly well that as a gentile, and even more as a gentile woman, she is trespassing onto highly sacred ground that is absolutely off limits to her.

But her love for her baby girl compels her to cross these brightly drawn, closely guarded lines of race, gender, ethnicity, and religion, just to seek some help for her daughter.

And for once in his ministry, Jesus gets it dead wrong. He does not help her, at least not at first. He rebukes her. Indeed, he calls her, in effect, a dog. It is arguably the most human moment of his ministry and certainly the ugliest.

Nevertheless, she persists. She does not let Jesus off the hook:
But she answered him, 'Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.'

To Jesus's credit, he immediately realizes she is right to press him on this point. But you have to wonder how that felt?

What was it like for this woman to approach Jesus of all people with such high hopes that he might heal her daughter, only for him to call her a dog?

As we continue our sermon series -- Living the Questions -- that's the question I want to explore today. How does that feel?

If you're a woman, you almost certainly have at least a little insight into this question. If a man in your life has ever talked over you, or ignored you, or silenced you when you've had something important to say . . .

Or mansplained to you how to do something you can do better than he can, then you perhaps know a little bit of how this woman might have felt.

But it's still true that for those of us who grew up white, and grew up Christian in America, it's impossible to fully appreciate what Jesus rebuke must have been like for this woman.

But we're going to try. So as we do from time to time, I'd like for you to close your eyes, if you're comfortable doing that, and come with me on an imaginative journey.

You're name is Fatima Hassan. You are a single mother, living with your daughter, Jazminda, in a small apartment in Little Rock, Arkansas.

As you have done every day for the last twenty-five years, you rise just before dawn. First you check on your daughter, to confirm that she is still sleeping, then you pad down to your bathroom where you wash your body carefully, lovingly, so that you might be clean and pure when you come into the presence of the divine one.

And then you slip back into your bedroom, quietly take out your well-worn prayer mat from the dresser drawer, and unroll it so that it is facing Mecca. In the distance, you hear the call to prayer, issued from the tower of the city's lone mosque, just down the street from where you live.

As the hauntingly beautiful call begins to fade, you step onto our mat and begin to pray. It is by far your favorite moment of every day.

For you are now alone with Allah. With deep and practiced devotion, you repeat the motions of the prayer, standing first, then bending, then kneeling, then, finally, you touch your forehead to the mat, to express your reverence, your devotion and your submission to your creator.

In that moment when your forehead kisses the mat, the moment of your greatest vulnerability, you feel the same thing you feel every morning. You feel seen, loved and accepted by God.

You finish your prayers, roll up your mat, then wake up your daughter to get her ready for school. But this morning she does not finish her breakfast. Instead she complains of a stomach ache.

Unfortunately you have to go to work. You have no choice. You get paid on commission and you can't afford to miss work, or to hire a baby-sitter to come and stay with her.

So you give your sweet daughter a single Tums and a child aspirin, then, as you've done every day since she started school, you kiss her on the forehead, tell her that you love her, and send her out to meet the bus.

Now it's your turn to get ready for the day. You go to your bedroom and wrap your hijab carefully around your head, before donning a simple long beige dress that covers your arms and extends past your ankles.

All of your female friends from college find your conservative mode of dress totally mystifying. They see it as a sign that you're willing to submit yourself to an oppressive, patriarchal religion.

But for you, dressing this way is actually a feminist declaration. For unlike your girlfriends, you never have to worry about what you will wear, or whether your legs are shaved and tan and shapely enough to be put on public display, or about men gaping openly at your body.

You make the drive into work and park in a trash filled lot in a sketchy part of town because it's all you can afford, and you begin to walk the eight blocks to your office.

You pass a man wearing a red baseball cap who sneers at you and loudly tells you to go back where you came from.

You walk on. Per your daily custom, you stop at the Starbucks across the street from your office to get a cup of chai and meet a well-dressed woman coming out the door. She takes one look at you and hisses that "your people" killed her sister on 9/11 and that you are not welcome here.

She hurries off before you can explain that your husband, Private Omar Hassan, was killed in Afghanistan fighting terrorists. And that's why you've moved back to Little Rock, with its small Muslim population, because it's all you can afford.

You would love to have shared with her what it's like to go, overnight, from being a proud American to being an enemy in the eyes of everyone who sees you in your hijab.

But the woman is gone and you will likely never have that chance, with her or anyone who looks like her. You are reminded yet again that your story will likely go forever untold, and unheard.

You make your way to your work station but your mind is scattered. You feel shaken by these encounters. They are not new. You've heard such things before.

Many times before in fact. But they still leave you feeling unnerved and jangly inside.

Just then your cell phone buzzes. It's your daughter's school. She is sick. It seems to have come on suddenly and it also seems to be serious. Can you come and get her?

Without even asking your boss, you race back to your car, then race even faster to your daughter's school, and, once she's buckled into her seat, faster still to the closest urgent care clinic.

You gladly pay the \$50 fee for her to be seen, even though it leaves you with just \$10 to make it through to payday, five days away.

Finally, a young female PA examines her. She says she can't say for sure what's going on, only that she thinks it's serious and that your daughter needs an MRI.

That is out of the question, as your employer does not provide you with health insurance and you're now down to your last \$10.

You drive your daughter home, give her a cup of herbal tea and put her to bed, and ponder your options, fear and dread gripping your heart. That's when you remember an article you read in USA Today about the big church out in the suburbs.

What you most remember is that the pastor has his own TV show and a private jet. You couldn't imagine then, and you still can't imagine, why he would need either of these things.

But you also remember something about how the church has an active program to help people in need.

Twenty minutes later you drive onto a gorgeous campus that reminds you of the expensive liberal arts college where your cousin goes to school. You park and make your way to the main office. The foyer looks like the entrance to a palace.

The woman at the front desk glances up, takes one look at you and her bright, friendly eyes immediately narrow and grow hard.

"May I help you," she says in a voice so cold it actually gives you chills.

You explain that your daughter is sick and that you took her to urgent care but they told you she needs an MRI and unfortunately you don't have any insurance, and you don't have enough money to pay for such an expensive procedure yourself.

"Can you please help me? My daughter is very sick."

"I'm sorry, that is not possible," the woman replies, without explanation.

Just then the large wooden door behind the woman opens and a tall man emerges. He is focused on his cell phone. He looks important and powerful.

You're not a good judge of such things but if you had to guess, you would say his suit and his shoes together probably cost more than you make in a month.

You take a step toward him. The woman at the desk stands up to block you but you've come this far, and you will not let anyone or anything block you from getting help for your daughter.

You step around her. "Sir, can you help me please?" He looks up from his phone and takes you in --your hijab, your long, plain dress that covers your whole body.

He gives you a look that makes you wish you had not come. You've seen that look before, on your father's face when you were growing up, when the neighbors let their dogs go to the bathroom in your yard.

He grew up in Egypt and hated dogs. He considered them to be dirty animals. And could not imagine why anyone would own one, let alone touch one, or have one in their house.

That's how you feel now, like one of those dogs.

"No," he says finally, in response to your question and begins walking away.

"But sir," you say, as you step into his path, your voice rising with a mix of panic and desperation.

"My daughter is only eight years old. She's sick and she needs an MRI. And I have no money. I saw an article about you in USA Today. You have your own Lear jet. I know you can help her."

He stops and appears to consider what you've just said. You seize the opportunity to continue.

“Please, sir, have a heart. I am a good person. I pray like you. I live a good and faithful life, just like you. I go to worship every week, just like you.”

And then you do something you did not think was possible. You take off your hijab, in public. In front of a man you do not know. It's the hardest thing you've ever done. You are still fully clothed from your neck down, but you feel naked, exposed, vulnerable.

“Sir, I'm not just a Muslim. I am a human being. I am not your enemy. I am your neighbor.”

Then, you pull a photo of your daughter from your pocket, the one you keep with you always. It was taken at her last birthday party. She has her arm around her best friend, with her blonde hair and blue eyes. They both have frosting on their lips and smiles on their faces that could light the night sky.

You hold it up so he can see it. “Please, sir, I'm asking you. What if she was your daughter?”

You do not know this but you've jogged his memory, of stories his mother used to tell him about how she came to this country from Warsaw with her parents when she was just a young girl, and how she was teased and mocked at school because she looked different and dressed different from all the other children at school.

Which reminds him of why he went into ministry in the first place, back before the money and the fame and the private jet, how he simply wanted to share the Good News of God's love for everyone with as many people as possible.

You know none of this. All you know is that he reaches into his jacket pocket, pulls out his checkbook and begins to write a check.

“Here,” he says, tearing out the check and handing it to you. “This should pay for an MRI plus a little extra. By the way, what's her name?”

You glance down and see that he's written it for \$10,000. You're so stunned, so overjoyed, you don't hear him clearly.

“I’m sorry, what?”

“What’s your daughter’s name?”

You have to blink the tears back and take a deep breath before you can answer.

“Jazminda,” you say. “We named her after her grandmother. But I call her Jaz. Because she was born in America and she makes beautiful music, just with her laugh.”

“And what is your name?” the man says.

“My name is Fatima. Fatima Hassan.”

“Fatima, I’m Jim. It’s nice to meet you,” he says, extending his hand. You take it. “Please come back and see me after your daughter has her MRI. I want to know how she’s doing.

We’re all just a little bit racist, sometimes. The sentiment is funny when it’s a song sung by puppets. Much less so when it’s a story in the Gospels, and the person in question is Jesus.

So why is it in there? What is the Good News in this story? Maybe to show us that sometimes we need to persist in our petitions to get what we want.

Or maybe to show us that the dog days are over; that God’s love and welcome is always greater than ours, and that even the most marginal seeming members of our society are worthy of love, mercy and compassion.

And that, yes, practicing this same love and welcome will stretch us. At least on this one occasion, it was even hard for Jesus, and it will sometimes be hard for us.

But that is no excuse. And it’s why I believe it’s important, at least from time to time, to look at this story, to consider this woman’s experience and to ask:

What was that like?