

## WILDERNESS: WEEK FIVE

Everywhere and Nowhere | True Belonging | High Lonesome  
| Move In Closer | **Speak Truth To Baloney. Be Civil.** | Hold  
Hands. With Strangers. | Strong. Soft. Wild.

### SCRIPTURE:

20 He went on: "What comes out of a person is what defiles them. For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person."

From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.

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." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter."

So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Mark 7:20-30

## THE FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, UCC

Lent 2024

### How-to:

1. Find **six-seven times to meet** with your group between February 18 and April 6. Groups should be no fewer than 2(!) and no more than 10 people. If you choose to meet 6 times, combine weeks 1 and 2.
2. Each week, Elissa will pass out a handout with questions and quotes related to that week's sermon, to be used as the starting point for your group discussion. **Do not feel limited to them.** Feel free to bring your own material to supplement.
3. **Resist the urge** to focus on "what you will get" from this small group. Instead, ask yourself how you can contribute to this group, and what God is going to do through you because of this new community.
4. **Keep in mind** that healthy small groups will develop with an **investment** of time and a collection of shared experiences, and will flourish where there is trust and grace. Earn each other's trust by keeping **confidential** the personal details people share. Extend grace and respect to one another when you disagree on theology or on another topic. It will happen, and that's okay. As business leadership author Stephen R. Covey wrote, "Strength lies in differences, not in similarities."
5. **Pray.** Open with a check-in (a high/low from the week and/or an experience of God), so you bring all of yourselves to the meeting. Close with prayer requests for the week, that you might hold one another in prayer

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For further Reflection:

"We know that at this time the fishing industry was being steadily restructured for export, so that the majority of fish were salt preserved or made into a fish sauce and shipped to distant markets throughout the empire. All fishing had become state-regulated for the benefit of the urban elite—either Greeks or Romans who had settled in Palestine following military conquest or Jews connected with the Herodian family. They profited from the fishing industry in two ways. First, they controlled the sale of fishing leases, without which locals could not fish... Second, they taxed the fish product and its processing, and levied tolls on product transport. Local administrators handled royal leases, contracts and taxes—..

"This transformation of the local economy, made possible by the infrastructural improvements (roads, harbors and processing factories) carried out by the Herodians, functioned to marginalize and impoverish formerly self-sufficient native fishing families. Leases, taxes and tolls were exorbitant, while the fish upon which local people depended as a dietary staple was extracted for export [through port cities like Tyre]."  
– Ched Meyers<sup>1</sup>

Cassandra Dahnke and Tomas Spath define civility as, "Claiming and caring for one's identity, needs, and beliefs without degrading someone else's in the process. . . . [Civility] is about disagreeing without disrespect, seeking common ground as a starting point for dialogue about differences, listening past one's preconceptions, and teaching others to do the same. Civility is the hard work of staying present even with those with whom we have deep-rooted and fierce disagreements. It is political in the sense that it is a necessary prerequisite for civic action. But it is political, too, in the sense that it is about negotiating interpersonal power such that everyone's voice is heard, and nobody's ignored."  
(Brown, Wilderness worksheet)

*"The amount of energy needed to refute "baloney" is an order of magnitude bigger than to produce it."*  
– Alberto Brandolini (edited)

#### **FOR YOUR SELF-REFLECTION:**

**Start** by reading chapter 5 in *Braving the Wilderness*. If you have not already, it might be helpful to listen to this week's sermon, available on the First Church Youtube page: <https://www.youtube.com/@FirstChurchBTV> . If you have time, we also recommend reading Ava's sermon from The Table on Friday. It is attached in the back.

1. There are lots of theories on why Jesus used an ethnic slur in this passage from Mark. They range from "to make a point that slurs/thoughts like this are absurd" to "he was angry for the oppression of his people at the hands of the Syrophoenicians." In her sermon, Elissa goes through these reasons, then finally concludes that regardless of *why*, there is importance simply in the fact that he did it. He, too, was caught up in the complications of being human of making a living. He, too, was caught in the politics of health and wealth and security. Perhaps Jesus was giving a lesson about civility, or perhaps the woman was, but either way they stayed engaged with one another.
  - a. Why were they able to stay engaged, across their ethnic and religious divides? What gave Jesus the strength? The woman?
  - b. How do you understand Jesus' actions in this passage?
2. Christine Porath's research and other studies "...show how implementing civility standards and enforcing them leads to higher-performing and better-functioning teams." She writes, "Incivility can fracture a team, destroying collaboration, splintering members' sense of psychological safety, and hampering team effectiveness."
  - a. Have you seen incivility break down a team, a project or a group? How and when?
  - b. Have you ever seen civility help a team be more effective? Work through a difficult subject or issue?
  - c. How are we doing with this at church?
3. What kind of boundary setting is important in our conversations around important or highly charged topics? How do we hold ourselves to those standards, even in less structured/formal settings?

#### **FOR YOUR TIME TOGETHER?:**

**Start by reading numbers 3-5 on the first page, and then go around the group and ask which question each person wants to make sure to discuss – then do it!**

1. Brene Brown writes that "The proliferation of BS in our culture today is primarily driven by three factors: a) *People feeling compelled to know everything*, b) *The growing dismissal of trust in objective inquiry*, and c) *The overuse of false dichotomies during emotional arguments (you're either with us or against us)*
  - a. When was the last time you said "I don't know" when someone asked you about an issue?
  - b. Did you do it because you didn't know, or because you felt overwhelmed?
  - c. How do we hold ourselves accountable to sticking to what we know, while still staying engaged in conversation around our values? Another way to put this is: how do we understand that neutrality benefits the oppressor [p.93], while still staying within the lanes of what we can back up with facts?
2. In her guide to the book, Brown asks us to reflect on whether we are holding ourselves accountable for backing up our opinions with facts? Do we value researching topics that are important to us and understanding all sides? If not, what do we do instead?
3. "Speaking truth to BS and practicing civility start with knowing ourselves and knowing the behaviors and issues that both push into our own BS or get in the way of being civil."
  - a. In her sermon from Friday, Ava challenges us to think about what issues are so real to us that they can trigger our own BS, and get in the way of us being civil and open. What are yours? What gets you worked up? What motivates you to keep going?
  - b. Similarly, on pages 113-114, Brown outlines how the B.R.A.V.I.N.G. checklist can help us know ourselves better, and reflect on our own participation in hard conversations. Which of the steps are most important for you? Why?
4. The Syrophoenician woman is the model of what we are talking about here. She acknowledges the situation, but remains present in ways that turn the situation on its head, showing a third way forward, beyond Jesus' you/us dichotomy.
  - a. How do you think she did it? What gave her the strength?
  - b. In what conversations do we often get stuck in a us/them dichotomy? Can we brainstorm some "third ways"?
  - c. Are there particular issues where you feel like you have the strength to do what she did? Particular conversations you know you do not?
5. Brown writes in chapter four that we are all at risk when dehumanization happens. The Syrophoenician woman changed the course of Jesus' ministry and the direction of the church that followed him, simply by refusing to give in to the dehumanization she saw. She called Jesus on it, gently. In doing so, it is not just her humanity that is restored, but Jesus' humanity, and in many ways his *divinity*. How is the ability to have these conversations a gift? How can we help each other develop those skills?
6. In her sermon, Elissa speaks of places where she feels she cannot bring her full self, and how it is risking a sense of deep belonging she once knew. Do you have similar places and/or relationships that are at risk in this way? How can we draw on our faith to transform those places?
- 7.

**Finish** by sharing your joys and concerns with one another. Write them down if it will help you remember them. Pray over them for each other until your next gathering.

**Closing Prayer** (feel free to say your own!): Dear God, thank you for this time together, for the blessing of these relationships. Help us keep one another in mind this week, as well as the insights and the challenges of our conversation. In your name we pray, Amen.

## The Syrophenician Woman

Preached by Ava Bilton at The Table

March 15, 2024

My second week back at First Church, Elissa and I were sitting in her office talking about the big picture vision of the church. I knew there was a lot I had to catch up on and I wanted to start trying to understand where our priorities were.

Elissa listed off a couple of the big projects the church had been working on through their visioning process, and then she said oh, and environmental stuff. I nodded and then thought about my husband and his... skeptical views on "silver bullet" environmental fixes and so I said "Oh, Mike will have some thoughts on that one..." Elissa looked at me with concern and said "Really? Like what?"

And then, I could feel it. That nausea in the pit of my stomach which always gathers when I sense conflict. Elissa is passionate about the environment – about the disastrous effects of climate change we are very clearly experiencing, and our collective inability to get it together enough to do anything about it. On the other hand, for the past four years, I have heard Michael's impassioned concern for the social impact of proposed environmental solutions and his deep frustration with the lack of consequential discernment from engineers and political leaders every single night when we walk our dog. As Elissa and I launched into a discussion on electric vehicles, I felt what Brene Brown talked about in chapter 5 of *Braving the Wilderness*: fear, acute emotions, and lack of knowledge.

In Mark, chapter 7, Jesus has a similarly charged encounter with a Syrophenician woman. Funnily enough, he has just gotten done telling off the Pharisees regarding their problematically exclusive behavior. In verse 6 he says to them:

<sup>6</sup> He said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

'This people honors me with their lips,  
but their hearts are far from me;

<sup>7</sup> in vain do they worship me,  
teaching human precepts as doctrines.'

<sup>8</sup> "You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."

<sup>9</sup> Then he said to them, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition!

You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition. In order to maintain the status quo – the way things are. To stay safely in the confines of your camp or comfort zone.

Only a few verses later, Jesus has left Jerusalem and gone into the region of Tyre – a region northwest of Galilee and described by my study bible as "largely Gentile and despised by Jews." Jesus is in this region his own people despise and:

He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, <sup>25</sup> but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. <sup>26</sup> Now the woman was a gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. <sup>27</sup> 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." <sup>28</sup> But she answered him, "Sir, <sup>29</sup> even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." <sup>29</sup> Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." <sup>30</sup> And when she went home, she found the child lying on the bed and the demon gone.

This woman sat on the outside of privilege in three major ways: she was female, she was a gentile, and she was poor. And yet, she still defied the prevailing tradition, coming into a Jewish man's house, bowing before him and asking for help. Jesus, a man of tradition himself, practically sneers at her. Alluding to a saying that extols the superiority of Israel over the Gentiles, Jesus emotionally sticks to his "side." But this woman pushes back, she leans in and when she does, Jesus can see *her* no longer defined by her "side." And he responds by healing her daughter.

I read and re-read this story, looked up commentaries and delved into footnotes, but then I closed my eyes and tried to imagine myself as this woman. A mother of a young daughter who is unwell. I hear that there is this healer in town, so I find out where he is staying, and I go kneel at his feet. I'm not dumb. I know how this game works. And I am willing to do whatever it takes if it means my daughter will be healed. And then, this healer rejects me. He won't help me because I'm on the other side. I'm not the right race. But, my race

shouldn't matter. If this guy can heal, my daughter should be healed. There is something more important at stake here than Gentile or Jew, than tribe. My daughter.

Meditating on this, I realized that focusing on the real thing - in this case the woman focusing on her daughter and getting her the healing she desperately needed - allowed her to see through the bullshit that even Jesus couldn't quite see through. [I use the word bullshit because it's in the title of our chapter in *Braving the Wilderness* this week: *Speak truth to bullshit, be civil.*] Undeterred by centuries of codes and systems that forced separation and preached hierarchies that created great suffering for marginalized people like the Syrophenician woman, she wouldn't let herself be scolded into the bullshit position of the "dog." She refused to be diminished in such a way. There was something more important than acquiescing to the bullshit racist, sexist, and classist status quo - saving her daughter.

That's exactly what happened in my conversation with Elissa. Our back and forth came off the boil, we moved on to other topics and then she looked at me and said: I'm sorry I got so emotional about that, I just keep thinking about my daughter. Winter isn't the same here anymore. Climate change is real and it feels like we aren't doing anything to stop it. I'm so worried about what kind of world my daughter is going to have when she grows up. If she will have one at all.

Similarly, Michael, believes deeply in the reality of climate change and it terrifies him. But, at the same time, he sees that some of our solutions are making it impossible for poor people to survive, and he is worried about them - about the realities for millions of people who might lose access to transportation, and so their employment. He's not saying we shouldn't address climate change, but he is concerned about the impact some of our more prominent solutions are having on already marginalized people.

Those are the real things. Our family, our neighbors.

How often, when we're talking about the big issues - climate change, abortion, gun control, the election - do we end up sitting on one of two bullshit sides? Reduced to a set of talking points and projecting opinions gleaned from those in our "camp." We do this so much we have started to forget what is real. Stories have been spun around these concepts that have divided us into tribes so far apart it's hard to even recognize the people on the other side as human - just like Jesus calling this woman a dog. The only way we will ever be able to humanize ourselves again, to recognize the humanity of the person across the table, or knocking on our door is to re-focus on what is real.

For me, here is what is real: my husband. My parents and my sister. My best friends. My love of cooking. My addiction to Mexican food and margaritas. The embarrassing number of times I've watched *Ted Lasso*. And, as I woman, I care very much about being able to discern between me, my health care provider, and God what is best for my body. In any given season of life. I want to be healthy and I want my family to be well.

I am also terrified about how warm it is outside right now. But, honestly, I feel overwhelmed by how much there is to do to change our trajectory.

I am worried about how hard it is to live these days. I think anyone who works 40 hours a week should be able to buy a decent house, take care of their family, get medical care, and go on vacation every once in a while. Just that very basic concept seems out of reach.

I am not a political party or a side, a camp or tribe, I am not solely reducible to my gender, race, or class. I am a complex human being full of paradox. I refuse to give up everything that's real to me to maintain a bullshit status quo.

So tonight, I wonder: what is real to you. At your table, please discuss what is the "real stuff" you are focusing on - the stuff that deeply matters, that's driving you forward and bringing you home.

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<sup>1</sup> Myers, Ched. Downloaded 3/17/24: <https://radicaldiscipleship.net/2015/01/22/lets-catch-some-big-fish-jesus-call-to-discipleship-in-a-world-of-injustice/>

<sup>2</sup> Many of these questions come from study guides created by Brown herself.