

The Woman of Tyre for posting

Mark 7:24-30

24 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, 25but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. 26Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. 27He 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.' 28But she answered him, 'Sir,\* even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.' 29Then he said to her, 'For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.' 30So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Will you pray with me please?

We have this past week watch with dismay as Israel and Hezbollah in southern Lebanon have again been at war. This story takes us to one the hardest hit places, Tyre is now a suburb of Haifa and has seen much damage and destruction this week. I wrote this story before the war began and I hope that as you travel back in time with me in your imagination, it will help you envision peace, not only in the Middle East, but all around our world.

I have lived all my life in Tyre, the great seaport of Syria built by the Phoenicians. Once a prosperous island port, it was destroyed about three hundred years ago by Alexander the Great. After it was subdued, Alexander rebuild it as a Greek city and included a causeway making us part of the mainland. Some of my ancestors came here at that time. We Greeks still constitute a large community. We have our own temples, and among ourselves we speak Greek, although in this cosmopolitan city we all speak several languages. And though, a century ago Tyre, became part of the Roman Empire, it was able to retain some autonomy, and the city has prospered and we Greeks have kept our position among the cultural leaders of the city.

My mother, had been born in Thyatira, a farming community north and west of Tyre, about 2/3 of the way to Athens if you went overland. It might as well have been on the other side of the world. When she was young, a marriage had been arranged through some relatives, to my father, a sailor who had found steady work out of the port of Tyre. I was named Lydia, after my grandmother and her grandmother – a sure reminder of loved ones far away. When I was 3, my father disappeared. We presume he went down with his ship. Not long after, my mother, fell ill and died, and though I was too young to know, most said it was from grief. My brother, Panos, then just one year old, and I went to live with my father's brother, uncle Timeus, and though he was not perfect as his name would claim, it was a wonderful to become part of his large, chaotic family. We never went hungry but new clothes for the orphan girl were never high on the family's budget priorities. My aunt Agatha, true to her name, taught me to sew, and I picked up embroidery by watching her and experimenting. Soon I could make clothes for myself. My brother was apprenticed to a carpenter, eventually becoming a master and now he often travels to distant parts of the empire, his skills are in such demand.

I am not bad-looking, and my uncle and brother found a good husband for me who worked in the shipyards. Erasmus was an honest and kindly man who treated me well. He was strong and hardworking and his tasks were difficult and dangerous. For all his strength he was always tender with me, even though he teased me. We laughed a lot and I learned to tease back. We were very happy. Before long we were expecting our first child. He was excited about the son he felt sure we would have.

Then shortly before the baby was born, Erasmus was crushed by a falling timber and died in a few days. It seemed like the end of the world to me. In my loneliness and grief I gave birth to a little girl. When the midwife had cleaned up the baby, she laid her in my lap. I had expected her to be red, even ugly, as I had known new babies to be. I was surprised and amazed to find that she was beautiful. Then she opened her eyes and I saw that they were deep violet in color. I held her close and felt her respond. I named her Zoe, which means "life," for I felt that she had given me back my life.

After a period of working on the new summer palace for Herod in Tiberias in Galilee, Panos had some time off and was free to help me find a little house in the small Greek community on the outskirts of town. It is on the main road into the city and not expensive. It has been a good place for Zoe and me. Before he was married, Panos lived with us when he was home. And next door lived Eunice and her husband, Damian, a merchant who traveled almost all the time. This left Eunice very much alone like me with her baby Irene and son George a

toddler. So Eunice and I have become good friends; we look after each other's children, and they learned to play together so well, and as they got older, George was a loving, and free, baby-sitter. With some little time to myself, I began to work at home, making clothes for people. Agatha had nurtured my talent for sewing and embroidery. When Zoe grew out of swaddling clothes, I made her little tunics and embroidered them with flowers, often in purple, the Tyrian color, and Zoe's color too. When we went to the well or the market, women noticed my beautiful daughter and her lovely clothes, and soon I had as much business as I could handle.

Right from the beginning I seemed to understand Zoe from the inside. I knew how she felt and what it took to make her happy. I could explain things to her so that she understood and would cooperate. Discipline was never a problem. She has wisdom beyond her years. She became my friend and teacher. She knew how to comfort me when I was discouraged. She grew more beautiful with each passing year, and was maturing rapidly, I realized I ought to begin to think about arranging a marriage for her, I dreaded the time when she would leave our little house and I would be alone again.

And then, suddenly, she began to fade before my eyes. Fatigued, even simple tasks were beyond her and now found it hard to get out of bed.

In alarm I sent for a physician. He said that a powerful demon had possession of her. He was familiar with demons that cause seizures and demons that cause paralysis, but this demon he did not know. He suggested a potion. Eunice bought the herbs and helped me make it. We tried it faithfully, but Zoe grew no better. She lay on her pallet day after day. Her skin grew pale; then chalk white. Her eyes lost their luster. Then the bleeding began, first from her nose, and later from her gums. I was now afraid she would die. I tried every doctor in the city. One knew about a physician in Sidon. I sent a messenger with money, and the doctor came. But he had never seen this demon before either. Still, he suggested new potions, but I could see that even he did not think they would cure her.

I went to the temple and made offerings. I prayed to Demeter, who had grieved for her daughter Persephone, carried off to the underworld; I also prayed and made sacrifices to Aesclepius, the god of healing. One day, the attendant at the temple told me that Aeselepius had once said, "Only the wounded can heal." I thought back on the physicians we had consulted and wondered if any of them had ever really been wounded. They seemed to have so little feeling for what we were facing. They were too eager to get out of the house and go on to less difficult cases. Zoe grew weaker and at times was unconscious. I watched by her bed at night, bathing her with cool water. Eunice often watched in the day while I tried to rest, but I was too worried to sleep much. Our money was dwindling, but I could not concentrate on work. My fear for Zoe blotted out everything else. One day Eunice rushed in, quite excited. She had heard that a man from Galilee, known far and wide for his healing power, had left his own country and was in ours. It was thought he would be coming to Tyre. I vaguely remembered that my brother had mentioned such a man when he returned from working in Galilee. I thought he said his name is Joshua, or Jesus in Greek.

I usually prefer not to be around Jewish people, for they think they are the chosen race. Of course, I know that we Greeks can feel superior too. However if this man were really a powerful healer, I would be humble before him; even call him "Son of David" – the name for their king, if that would get him to talk to me.

Now Eunice heard that he was coming into Tyre on our very road. Even as she spoke, we heard the noise of a crowd in the distance. She urged me to go. I pulled on my mantle and rushed out. I could see the crowd now, stopped in front of a house which I remembered belonged to a Jewish family.

In the midst of the crowd, I saw a tall man who seemed to be the center of attention, He was about to enter the house. I rushed up, elbowing my way through the crowd, and cried out, "Son of David, have mercy on me. My daughter is possessed by a demon." He did not answer me. I pushed my way a little nearer and was able to fall at his feet. I tugged at his robe to get his attention. "Son of David," I cried again, "my daughter will die if you do not help me." People shouted me down. They urged him to send me away and began shoving me. I was being a nuisance. I stopped pleading and looked at this man, and I was shocked by what I saw. He was utterly exhausted. His face had little color and he seemed near collapse. Had he come to our beautiful seaside city in need of rest and healing himself? Had he hoped no one would recognize him in another country? My pity went out to him. For a moment I considered whether I should just go home and leave him alone. But when I thought of Zoe, I knew I could not give up.

Then I remembered Aesclepius. Was this the wounded healer?

Once again I tugged at his garment. "Sir," I said quietly, "she is all that I have." I saw that he did not have the strength to do what I asked. He seemed a bit confused. Now he looked over my head, not seeing me, and said coldly, "I did not come to heal your people. I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." I clung to him, imploring him to help, but he simply did not see me. I was the stranger, the outsider, a nuisance; Again he looked over my head and said, "It is not right to give the children's bread to dogs." The word calls up hordes of wild dogs, roaming the streets, feeding on garbage, and licking the sores of the beggars and lepers. But He hesitated over the word, and gave it the diminutive ending, making it little dogs, or puppies. I saw hope in this. If he expected me to slink away, he would be disappointed. I stood up now and looked directly at him. I said quietly, "Sir, even the little dogs under the table are nourished by the crumbs that fall from the children."

Now he looked at me and our eyes met, I saw surprise, perhaps even admiration, on his face. I watched him as he gathered his energy. The exhaustion seemed to fall from him. He looked at me now with kindness and said quietly, "For what you have just said, go your way in peace. Your daughter is healed."

Somehow I believed him. I bowed in thanks, pushed my way through the crowd, and ran back home. It was true! Zoe was still lying on her bed, but the color had returned to her face and the brightness to her eyes. "Mother," she said, "I'm hungry." While she ate I told her everything that had happened. She said she must see him herself and thank him for giving her back her life. I suggested we wait until morning, but she was afraid he might leave early. How could I refuse her? She washed herself and took a little time to choose a clean tunic to wear, a purple one. She looked lovely and like herself again. We walked together in the twilight to the house where I had encountered him. I hoped he had had time to rest. I knocked and asked the man who opened the door if we might speak to Jesus for a moment, He hesitated, but Jesus heard us and came to the door himself. Zoe thanked him a bit shyly, but with her usual grace. I told him that our Greek god of healing, Aesclepius, had said, "Only the wounded can heal," He listened thoughtfully and nodded his head. He said that the Hebrew prophet Isaiah had foretold that the Messiah would be a *suffering servant*, "a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief" (Isa. 53:3b KJV).<sup>2</sup> Isaiah had also said that the Messiah would be a healer:

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,

and the ears of the deaf unstopped;  
Then the lame shall leap like a deer,  
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.  
—Isaiah 35:5—6

He blessed Zoe, and I knelt so that he could bless me too, He thanked us for coming, and we took our leave.

Every day Zoe became more energized and stronger. It was almost a week later that, Zoe said to me, “Mother, I have been stalled long enough – time to get on with my life, time to get married. George and I have always loved each other. Will you give us your blessing?” Marveling, laughing and crying all at once, I exclaimed, “Of course”.

Everyone was excited and happy with the idea. We are all planning a wedding for spring. George and Zoe and Irene spend time roaming the neighborhood, looking for a little house. Zoe and Irene are excited that they will be sisters now. And I won't lose Zoe after all. I look forward to being a mother-in-law, and a grandmother!

Sometimes at night I lie awake in wonder and gratitude. I think how the wounded healer finally came to us, not one of our own people, but a member of a group I had avoided. I think with humility that I helped him see that his message and his gift of healing are for everyone, not just his own people. And I am glad that I am Greek, with a long, rich heritage and enough self-confidence to speak for myself, and enough pride not to be humiliated by an insult. When your child's life hangs in the balance, you find resources in yourself that you didn't know you had, You can demand help from a stranger too exhausted to treat you with courtesy. When we parted, Jesus said, “Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you” (Matt. 7:7).