

(Play a portion of “Respect”)

You have had to have your head buried in the sand not to realize that Aretha Franklin died last week. Aretha has been one of my favorite singers. Maybe it was because she learned to sing in church; I don't know for sure. But I have always appreciated her music. It gets me moving, pulsing, even dancing. “Respect” is one of my top ten songs of all time. In some ways, it was a bit of a radical song. It's about a woman asking for respect from her man, something that he might not have been giving to her. She's not simply asking for it; she is demanding it.

Now truthfully, demanding women haven't always been viewed so highly in history. Sometimes there are even some demeaning names used to describe such women.

We've got a demanding woman in our gospel reading for today. She's a foreigner, Mark tells us. Jesus has come into foreign land. He has gone into the region of Tyre, Gentile territory. Jesus has once again crossed a boundary. But it appears that this crossing was not meant for a lot of social interaction. The Bible tells us that “he entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there.”

Yet Jesus' attempt to not be noticed doesn't go so well, as is the case for many of us when we go to Meijer's. “He could not escape notice,” Mark tells us. A woman whose daughter had an unclean spirit—what is known by this pre-scientific reference is not completely clear—bowed down at his feet. I suspect that this behavior may not have been culturally approved. Men could do something like that in the presence of other men, but probably not women.

Nonetheless, Mark goes to great lengths to tell us that this woman wasn't one of Jesus' kind. He tells us that she was a Gentile or a Greek. Gentiles or Greeks were not the friends of Jews, the people with whom they should be hanging out. And not only was she a Greek; she was a *Syrophoenician* woman. “Syro” refers to Syria, and Syria

became Syria when the Romans overtook that region many years previously. The Romans were the enemies of the Jews. “Phoenician” refers to an ancient enemy of the Israelites. The Phoenicians were probably the Canaanites, the arch enemy of Israel for a very long time.

Jesus is being disturbed not only by a woman, but by a person who is a three-fold enemy of his people. No wonder he is crabby! But let’s face it, Jesus. You put yourself there. You crossed the boundary.

The woman begs Jesus to cast out the demon from her daughter. She’s a mamma, and her baby is sick. And she wants the best medical care that she can get. And Jesus is the best medical care that she can get. Mammamas whose babies are threatened often can be like dogs on bones.

I remember when our son Micah was born and he had to stay in the hospital because he had jaundice. We were new parents, and we didn’t know much. All we knew was that our baby was sick and we were filled with anxiety. We didn’t know that this was a common condition. It didn’t matter. This was our baby. And my wife was a bit of tiger when dealing with the folks at the desk. They were acting as if this was just an ordinary event. This was no ordinary baby. We need care, and we need it now.

Jesus initially didn’t respond well to the woman’s anxiety and begging. “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs,” he says to her. Whoa! Did I just hear Jesus call this woman a dog? Did I just hear him slam the Gentiles? Yes! “Dogs” was an ethnic slur for Gentiles. He’s telling her that he needs to feed his own people first. He shouldn’t be taking what he had for his own people and cast it off to nobodies, to impure, unclean enemies of his people.

Well, the woman is a bold woman. She wants a little R.E.S.P.E.C.T. Or more than that, she wants her daughter healed. She is a mamma. She is like a dog on a bone, and she won’t give up. She says to Jesus, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” I love people who can think on their feet. And this woman is thinking on her

feet, or maybe more appropriately, on her knees. She's not going to give up on Jesus; he is the great healer. And she wants healing for her daughter. You parents understand this.

And Jesus said, "You win. Because you said what you said, because of your tenacity, because of your nerve, because you spoke up for yourself, your daughter has been healed. The demon has left her."

Are you telling me that Jesus had something to learn? Are you telling me that sometimes Jesus thought in prejudicial ways just like other members of his community? Yep! Are you telling me that this foreign woman changed him? Yep!

You know it strikes me that often we think that people who have it all together are the folks who have nothing to learn. They are the one who have it all down pat, always think the right way, speak the right way, treat people the right way. I don't know, and maybe this is going way too far with this text, but I suspect that the folks we might want to listen to aren't always the folks who appear to have it all together and always say the right things, but the folks who are willing to follow a correction in the course, willing to confront people who might change them or take them to a deeper, more compassionate place, might actually be willing to learn. Sometimes what we associate with God is static-ness, his always being the same. What is fascinating to me about the Old Testament is that in it God is frequently changing God's mind. A new situation occurs and God decides to go in a different direction.

Jesus today is going in a different direction. And actually, he put himself there. He put himself in Tyre, foreign-ville. He put himself in Sidon, in the Decapolis—foreign-ville. He may not have known what he was getting himself into, but he went, nonetheless. The trajectory of the gospel of Mark at this point is clearly to foreign-ville. The trajectory, the movement is toward the inclusion of more and more. Jesus in the previous chapter of Mark had just fed 5000 of his own people. In the next chapter, he is going to feed 4000 *Gentiles*. This Jesus story, this kingdom of God reality is like the universe; it is ever-

expanding. That is the way it is in the realm of God. In the realm of God, life doesn't close in on itself; life opens up. It does not keep out. It welcomes.

So follow Jesus. Cross the border. I don't know what kind of border you need to cross. I suspect that the borders that exist are as plentiful as the people who live in the areas defined by them. Maybe your border has to do with people who have a different skin color than you, a different religion than you, a different nationality than you, a different political philosophy than you. Maybe your border has to do with class, economic status, sexual orientation. Maybe your border simply has to do with your own self, your own ego, your way of thinking, your fear, your own agenda, your own need of being right. Richard Rohr points out that a preoccupation with all of that ego-centered stuff is what gives us tribalism, what makes us preoccupied with our own little groups, our own little tribes.

Follow Jesus. Cross the border. Get outside of your own little world, your own little club, your own little head, your own little ego, your own little need to be right. Well, I might not say the right things; I might not get it right if I do so, you might say. Sometimes Jesus didn't either. If Jesus had something to learn, I suspect that you might have something to learn, too.

Go ahead, cross the border. Sit down and maybe eat with folks who might not look like you, act like you, think like you, be a part of your little tribe. Your tribe is somewhat interesting and helps define you, but it is not everything and can cause you to turn inward and let life collapse on you. The kingdom of God is always expanding, always moving outward. And the amazing thing is that as it takes you outward it will not bring about less of you. It will not give you less life—the fear which causes many of us to stay in our ego-driven, tiny-club worlds. It actually will bring you more life. Your life will become so much richer when you cross the border. Death will indeed give way to resurrection.

One of my grandson's favorite songs is a almost two-decade-old song by the Baha Men: "Who Let the Dogs Out?" It's a fun song. I say

somebody let the dogs out today. And one of the dogs was bold enough to nip at Jesus' feet, scratch at his door, bark in his ear to get a little respect from him, to help him understand that the kingdom of God is an ever-expanding reality, an inclusive world. I suspect that this dog helped change Jesus, moved him beyond his little club.

You know, I suspect that *God* let the dogs out today so that we all would grasp that there are no dogs, only prized children of God, and so that we all might be blessed with a tenacious faith, one that enables us to live boldly and one that gives us the courage to move across the border.