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Mark 7:24-37

GOD'S YES

The Poet Laureate Billy Collins wanted to inspire high school students to read poetry. So he assembled an anthology of poems written by contemporary writers titled *Poetry 180*—one hundred and eighty poems for youth to read each day of the school year. And among the 180 poems is one written by poet Katylin Haught entitled "God Says Yes to Me."

I asked God if it was okay to be melodramatic
and she said yes
I asked her if it was okay to be short
and she said it sure is
I asked her if I could wear nail polish
or not wear nail polish
and she said honey
she calls me that sometimes
she said you can do just exactly
what you want to
Thanks God I said
And is it even okay if I don't paragraph
my letters
Sweetcakes, God said
who knows where she picked that up
what I'm telling you is
Yes Yes Yes

Imagine the impact such a poem could have on high school students struggling to discover who they are amidst all the pressures to perform, to succeed, to fit in with their peers, to accept themselves even when they are very different from others around them. Imagine the impact of knowing that God says yes to them.

Now maybe you have never doubted God's "yes" to you. Maybe you have always felt secure in God's love and acceptance. But too many high school youth as well as a whole lot of us adults have not heard this message enough in our lives. Many people have been taught that

God says "no" to them. Maybe you are one of them. Whether explicitly or implicitly, lots of people hear the message from their families, or from religious communities, or from society at large that they are not acceptable. No to you if you are lesbian or gay. No to you if you are a woman who feels called to be a leader in your church. No to you if you are transgendered. No to you if your skin is too dark or your hair is too curly. No to you if you haven't been to college. No to you if you've been divorced.

Many people believe that who they are or the actions they have committed put them beyond the reach of God's love. They have been told that there is something deficient about them. There is something wrong about them. There is something abhorrent about them. There is something substandard about them. "No" is the message they hear about themselves. And this includes the woman in our story today.

What is upsetting is that Jesus is the one telling her "no." He tells her "no" because she is a Gentile and up until this point, his ministry has been aimed at his own Jewish community. But this woman is a desperate mother who is seeking healing for her young daughter. And even though women were considered subordinate to men and were not supposed to approach men who were not their relatives, and even though she was a Gentile and thus considered unclean in the eyes of Jewish people, this mother overcomes all these cultural rules and barriers to seek healing for her child.

We cannot think about this woman in the past tense--for this woman surfaces in every generation and in every time in history. She is the African American mother praying her son will make it home safely. She is the undocumented mother afraid to take her sick child to the hospital for fear of deportation. She is the Afghan mother desperate to get her daughters out of

her homeland. She is the transgendered woman afraid she will be beaten up when people discover who she is. This Gentile woman and her desperation are still found among us today.

Jesus' response to the woman in this passage is so disturbing to many of us. How could Jesus reject her? How could this man of love refer to her as a "dog"? Some people have explained away Jesus' strange response by claiming Jesus was "testing" the woman's faith. But there is nothing in the story that would lead us to believe that this exchange was really some kind of test. Others have tried to soften Jesus' rejection by pointing out that the term Jesus used for "dogs" actually means "little dogs" or "puppies." But does calling her a puppy really soften Jesus' message in which he tells her that she does not warrant his attention? Not really. What it appears is that Jesus had absorbed some of the discriminating beliefs of his day about who was part of God's realm of love and care.

But following Jesus' rejection, two remarkable things happen.

The first remarkable thing is that the woman does not accept Jesus' "no." She will not accept his "no" because she believes in God's YES to her. She pushes back against Jesus' rejection, and makes her compelling argument. She tells Jesus, "I do not lie outside the realm of God's care. And even if it's only the left-over crumbs, I deserve at least some small blessing."

And then the second remarkable thing happens. Jesus says to her, "You're right." He says, "you're right." Jesus affirms this woman, her argument, and her right to receive God's blessings. And he heals her daughter.

This woman changed Jesus and how he understood the scope of his ministry and how he understood the scope of God's saving love. We know he was changed because just after this conversation with the Gentile woman, Jesus has an encounter with another Gentile—a Gentile

man who was deaf. But this time, Jesus does not reject the Gentile coming to him in need. This time Jesus heals the man with the statement: Be opened!

Be opened! Those words not only brought healing to the deaf man, they revealed a change in Jesus. Jesus permitted himself to being opened to the expansive scope of God's love. He allowed a Gentile woman to teach him about God's YES.

God is not a harsh, judging, condemning God who says "no" to us, who rejects us. We Christians understand Jesus as God's wonderful YES to humanity. Jesus is a sign that God does not turn away from us even when we behave badly but rather that God constantly turns toward us in radical love. All people deserve God's YES. Nobody lies beyond God's love. Nothing you or anybody else could do could ever keep God from loving you.

There are so many people around us who bear the wounds of all the "no's" they have had heaped on them by families and society, by churches and governments. But this table in front of us is a sign of God's YES to all of us. God says yes, you are worthy of my love, yes you are worthy of my blessings, yes you are worthy of my grace, yes you are worthy of my attention. This is a table where we who need God's love, come to be healed by that love and shaped by that love—so that we can then join our voices with God's voice in declaring to those around us: Yes, Yes, and Yes.