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**Sparring with God
Mark 7:24-30
September 6, 2015**

Do you remember The Smothers Brothers? I loved the Smothers Brother: Tommy and Dickie Smothers. Tommy played the dumb guy and Dickie the smart guy. Do you remember Tommy's famous line to Dickie?

"Mom always loved you best!"

I said that to Someone once. It was a year or two after Seminary, I was poor and working in a retail store. I lived in a rented townhome with a good friend named Deb. Deb and I were the same age, and our lives seemed to parallel one another.

We each went back to school in our mid 30s to get a Master's degree. We graduated at the same time. Deb found a job in her field; I could not. We both started dating different men at the same time. 6 months later, she was engaged, and on the same day, my man friend moved to Florida.

Deb's fiancé had a house in which she planned to move into after the wedding. I couldn't afford an apartment. She began to buy all kinds of furnishings for her home. I was given a hand me down sofa from a friend. I couldn't afford anything new.

As I watched all of Deb's dreams coming true, and everything going wrong in my life...I had had enough. I turned to God and said,

"You love Deb best!" (I really did.)

I was angry and frustrated, and had a few more choice words to say to God. I was clearly feeling ignored and felt like a second-class daughter in my walk with God.

In our scripture passage this morning, a woman is feeling like a second-class citizen, and has a few choice words to say to Jesus because of the way he treats her. Turn with me to our scripture passage this morning.

Read Mark 7: 24-30

This passage troubles many people because it appears Jesus is treating this woman badly. Keep in mind that Jesus is looking for some down time and alone time. You could say he was peopled out and preached out. And this woman is intruding. She wants Jesus to heal her daughter of a demon.

Then, add in the fact that the Jewish Jesus should be ignoring her completely. First, because she is a Gentile, and Jews and Gentiles do not associate with one another. Second, she is a woman, and it was considered improper for a woman to approach a man in public to whom is not related.

Given all that, Jesus should have said, "Go away." But we know Jesus, don't we? Our Jesus wouldn't say anything like that to someone in need. Instead, our Jesus said something even worse.

She begs him to heal her daughter, and Jesus says, "First, let the children eat all they want for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs."

What Jesus is saying is this: my immediate mission is to the Jews, and it is not right to take the work that's meant for the Jews and throw it to you – a dog. To be called a dog in this culture was not complementary. Dogs were dirty and filthy and had flees.

It sounds like Jesus is refusing, in a very rude way, to help this woman's daughter. But consider this: is it possible that we are not hearing this exchange the way the woman did? Because, instead of sulking away, she gives it right back to Jesus.

Do any of you remember a movie called "Yentl." It came out in 1983 starring Barbara Streisand. The movie takes place in the early 1900s. I remember the

opening scenes of Jewish men and boys discussing the Law in the temple. Women, by the way, were not allowed. Often times, the discussions of the law became quite heated especially among the rabbis as they debated back and forth.

This kind of verbal sparring was common for those who studied Jewish law. Proverbs 27:17 says, "Iron sharpens iron, and one person sharpens the wits of another." As the rabbis sparred with one another, they were sharpening each other's wits.

I talked with a Jewish friend of mine a couple of days ago, and he said as a boy remembering being in the synagogue and listening to the debates. The rabbis were challenging one another, he said, and it was fun.

This fact of Jewish sparring among rabbis helps us understand our passage today. Rabbi Jesus is not being rude to this woman, he instead is giving her an invitation to be his sparring partner. He is honoring her with this invitation because Jewish sparring with a rabbi was denied to women.

She didn't expect this invitation, but she recognizes that Jesus is inviting her to debate him. She didn't hesitate to dish it right back to Jesus: "Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

What she is saying is this: my daughter and I are worthy to receive even just crumbs at your table, Jesus. And there are plenty of crumbs from Jesus' table. This story in Mark is sandwiched between the feeding of the 5000 and the feeding of the 4000. There was an abundance of left overs in those miraculous feedings. Even though she is a Gentile and a woman, she wants those leftovers.

I can almost see Jesus nodding his head in admiration when the woman takes Jesus up on his sparring challenge. He tells her to go home, for her daughter is healed.

Sparring with God is not an uncommon thing in the Bible:

Hannah in the OT sparred with God. She begged God to give her a child (I Samuel 1). She prays and prays, and finally strikes a deal with God. Give me a child, she says, and when he is old enough, I will dedicate his life to work in the temple. And God agrees by giving her a son.

Abraham sparred with God. When God told Abraham of the destruction of the evil city of Sodom, Abraham pushes back at God: God, if there are 50 righteous people in the city, please spare it. God agrees. Abraham then whittles the number down, successively, to 45, 40, 30, 20 and 10 (Genesis 18:20-33). Each time, God agrees.

Moses sparred with God. God, speaking from the burning bush, called Moses to lead the Hebrews out of Egypt. Moses spent most of the conversation talking back to God, arguing that God had called the wrong man. He didn't win that argument, but, in the process, he received the help he needed to succeed (Exodus 3:13-4:17).

Habakkuk sparred with God. Habakkuk was a prophet for God, and his whole book in the Bible is a transcript of the prophet disputing with God.

Jacob sparred with God....literally...as in an actual wrestling match with God, which leaves Jacob with a permanent bad hip (Genesis 32:22-32)

In each of these cases, important changes take place in the lives of the debaters. Hannah learned there is no one like the Lord. Abraham learned more about God's righteousness. Jacob received a divine blessing. Moses freed his people. Habakkuk learned about trusting God in the midst of trouble.

And what did I learn so long ago in my sparring match with God when I accused God of loving my friend more than me? I learned that God was so much bigger than the box I had put Him in.

All these stories tell us that questioning, pushing back, expressing doubt, showing irreverence and arguing with God are not out of bounds. We need not fear that we'll offend God. God will have the final word, but we may receive insight,

inspiration, understanding, blessing, even if the answer isn't what we'd hoped for.

All these stories tell us that speaking to God about the things that bother us about God is still an act of faith. Why else would we be talking to God at all?

Maybe desperation and doubts and questions are the same thing as faith when we bring them to Jesus. In the Bible, faith is not believing the right confession or articulating the right doctrine. It is clinging to Jesus and expecting him to heal, to restore, to save. It's about demanding Jesus to do what he says he came to do.

The Gentile woman in our scripture passages teaches us about the nature of faith. She believed her daughter was worthy of God's attention and Jesus' time. So, she was willing to go to great lengths to help her daughter, even to the point of arguing with this famous teacher and healer.

This woman stormed the power of Jesus for healing. Often times we talk about faith as submission and acceptance, and there is that. But other times I think God expects more of us. We are expected to storm the gates of heaven with our bold prayers.

God is faithful. God's love will not let us go -- it is persistent -- it is searching -- it is relentless -- and God is pleased when we respond in kind. The story of this Gentile woman is our witness. May her feisty faith, and her dogged determination be ours as well. Amen.