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"Dogged Determination"  
September 6, 2009  
West Side Christian Church

Mark 7:24-27

Sometimes, God says "No." My wife, Marion, tells a story about when God told her "No." She says, "When I was in fourth grade, it was about this time of year, early September, that I began making my Christmas list. My mom would hand me the JC Penny catalog and I would go through and circle and cut out all that I wanted.

In those days the JC Penny's catalog was still free. It was chalked full of toys and clothes and everything else in between. I am sure it was just something to give me to keep me busy, but I loved it. I began searching. And it did not take me long to find exactly what I wanted. This particular year, in fact, it happened to be on the cover.

On the front page was a beautiful family, a mom and a dad and a few children, all in matching outfits that were, of course, on sale. The family was in the park, having a picnic. The little boy, though, was holding a leash. On the other end of that leash was the cutest dog I had ever seen. It was a Scottish Terrier. I circled the Scotty dog ten times! That year for Christmas, that is all I asked for. I tore out that page and put it on the refrigerator. Santa was going to bring me a Scotty Dog...with a big red bow, of course.

I spent the next four months praying for that Scotty dog. Every night before I went to sleep I prayed to God that God would persuade Santa to bring me a Scotty Dog (even though my parents had tried to prepare me that Santa would not bring me something to which I was allergic).

Well, Christmas morning came and I woke up. Although, I did not hear a bark, I knew he was waiting on me somewhere. The moment of truth came and my brother and I were finally allowed in the living room. I ran in and there it was, sitting on the couch, staring right back at me: a big *stuffed animal* Scotty dog, with that big red bow, of course. I just stared at it.

I turned to my folks and said, "I'm pretty sure they use real dogs in the catalog." For the longest time, that stuffed animal dog sat in my room reminding me of what I was denied....reminding me that God had said, "No."

We all have stories similar to this one. Those occasions both in childhood and adulthood, both serious and funny, when we prayed unceasingly for something, and our prayers were met by God with a "No." And it is not just *our* experience. It is the experience of those we read about in the Bible as well.

In the Old Testament, God says “No” to Adam and Even in the Garden when they want to eat the fruit of the tree of good and evil. God says “No” to Moses when Moses asks to see the Promised Land. God says “No” to David when David wants to build the Temple.

In the New Testament, Jesus says “No” to the disciples when they all want to be the greatest. Jesus says “No” to the crowds who want to stone the prostitute. Jesus says “No” to Peter when Peter rebukes Jesus and tells Jesus that he does not have to die.

It is no surprise, then, that Jesus would say “No” to this Syrophenician Woman in our reading this morning. The surprise, instead, is how he says it.

Jesus has left the towns and villages of his fellow Israelites where he has been doing his ministry, and retreats to a Gentile region known as Tyre. Mark tells us that he simply wants to get away and not be found. Yet, as he enters this place, a Gentile woman immediately recognizes him and tells him of her demon-possessed daughter who is in desperate need of healing.

Jesus replies with not only an emphatic, “No,” but a statement that has been deemed by many to be, at best, condescending, at worst, even discriminatory. He says, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

Of course, “dog” in this particular context is not a statement about a little animal like the Scottish Terrier that Marion wanted from the JC Penny Catalog. During this time, “dog” means those disgusting scavengers that live in the streets, living off garbage. And given the request this Gentile woman has just made of Jesus, his reply insinuates that his miracles, his energy, should be used for the children of Israel, the Jews that he has been healing and teaching, not the Gentiles--those considered to be unclean heathens.

No matter how many times I read this text, it is always surprising that Jesus responds to the woman in this way. However, if we understand this woman’s status in the first century, the way he says “No” is still not the most shocking part of this story.

Remember, not only was she a woman, which was stigma enough in those days, requiring her to be silent. She was also a gentile, even more stigmatizing according to Jewish law. Add to this the fact that she has a demon-possessed daughter and we have an individual that should have never been in the town limits at all, let alone up close and personal with a holy man, speaking to him.

Therefore, the most shocking part of the story is the way that she pushes back against Jesus....the way that she challenges him...the way that she ultimately convinces Jesus to heal her daughter. She says, “Even the dogs under the table eat

the children's crumbs." Her determination to have her daughter healed compels her to say to Jesus, "Even though we are Gentiles, we are still part of God's creation, we still have basic needs, we still have needs just like the Israelites. We still need the grace and mercy of God."

This story reminds me of a well-known Old Testament story about Jacob. If you recall, Jacob was traveling with his family in the wilderness when he comes across a stranger who demands a fight with Jacob. Jacob responds to the dare and wrestles this man all night, finally pinning the stranger down until the stranger demands he be let go.

However, Jacob tells the stranger he will not let him go until the stranger gives him a blessing. The stranger finally gives in and Jacob's determination gets him his blessing. We find out at the end of the story that the stranger was actually God. Jacob wrestled with God until God's "No" became God's "Yes."

I wonder what might happen if we responded to God's "No," in our own lives, the way that both the Syrophoenician woman and Jacob respond to God's initial "No." I wonder if we are too easily satisfied with the notion that if God says "No" then it must not be God's will.

Every time I read this story, I cannot help but have my theology challenged, my beliefs called into question, and my commitment and faithfulness tested. Do I have the same dogged determination this woman has in asking God for the things that I believe God should be doing in the world? When something does not come to fruition that we have prayed for, is it that it is not God's will, or is it that we give up too easily on God and on ourselves?

It seems like there is a mantra that is chanted in the church these days, not just this church, but all churches. The mantra sounds something like: "we have already tried that before" or "that just won't work here" or even "that's just not possible." I cannot help but think that behind these phrases is a willingness to give up too easily, a faithfulness that does not want to be challenged, a commitment that only goes so far, perhaps it is even a barrier to God's will being lived out.

Now, let me be clear about something at this point: what I am saying is not that if we pray for something and it does not happen, then we just did not pray hard enough. God's will is not a science. The point of this story from our reading is not that if you have more faith, the things you ask God for will be granted. God is not a Genie or a magician.

The point is that this woman displays a faithfulness and commitment that is largely absent in the church today. She believes so firmly that Jesus can and should heal her daughter, against all the social and religious rules and improprieties, that she does not give up in the face of an initial "No." She stays committed to her faith even when it feels like God is kicking her while she is down.

Healing, reconciliation, forgiveness, grace, love--these divine concepts are not simple or easy to live out. They are complex, difficult, and challenging ways of living. They require a determination and commitment on our part, a deep and grounded faith, in order for us to work with God in bringing them to fruition.

So I ask you West Side Christian Church, what is it that you are committed to? What do you believe is God's will for this church? Are you determined to pay off the mortgage on the fellowship center? Are you committed to adding staff in order to meet the needs of this congregation? Do you have faith that God is working through Angel Food and growing that ministry at the pace it needs to grow? Are you dedicated to modifying worship in order that the people of this church are able to worship God in a variety of ways that are meaningful? How committed are you?

God has certainly said "Yes" to us over and over again. However, God's "No" may be an initial test to see how committed we are to the things we have laid out in our Vision. When the Syrophenian woman responded with dogged determination to Jesus' initial "No." Jesus responds to the woman, "For saying that you may go, your daughter is healed." Jesus responds to her dedication and faith with a "Yes."

Amen.