

Crumbs
Mark 7:24-30

Alexa Leary spent 111 days in hospital and was on the point of death at least 8 times after a bike accident in 2021. On Wednesday she held an Olympic gold medal in her hand.

Just a year ago American swimmer Ali Truwitt lost a leg in a shark attack, this week she won a silver medal in the 400m freestyle.

I could go on forever . . . you don't have to look far to find amazing stories of athletes at the Paralympics. If it takes extraordinary commitment, perseverance, fortitude, and planning for the able-bodied athletes to compete how much more for the Paralympians?! To be the best of the best takes single-minded focus, huge mental and physical strength and an unwavering commitment to the plan. The plan is everything . . . making sure the mind and body peak at just the right time . . . in pursuit of a singular goal.

But, you don't have to be a world class athlete to have a plan. We all have plans of some sort. You and I make plans every day. Plans give us order and structure. It's how the world keeps turning . . . through the laws and structures of nature . . . the hours, the days, the seasons . . . and even when things are a bit chaotic we know the sun will rise tomorrow, because that's the plan! Even God has a plan. Now that's a truism, isn't it? How many times have you been told that? God has a plan. God has a plan for the world. That's no secret . . . it's laid out in the Old Testament . . . God's plan of salvation for the whole world . . . mediated through the people of Israel . . . salvation first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles . . . that's the grand plan . . . it's the plan Jesus knew well . . . Jesus was focused on the plan . . . setting his face towards Jerusalem, as the gospel stories say again and again . . . it's the plan he was bringing to fulfillment . . . and nothing was going to get in his way . . .

. . . except a woman! An unnamed woman! A Gentile woman! A Syrophenician woman.

This brave, determined, devoted woman interrupts Jesus . . . she comes and falls at Jesus' feet and begs him: "Cast the demon out of my daughter . . . set her free!" Jesus looks at her and says, "Sorry lady, I'm not up to that part of the plan yet, you'll have to wait. I must stick to the plan." Well, I'm paraphrasing . . . the words he actually uses are much more confronting . . . I guess you have to be firm with people sometimes if you want to stay on track: "Let the children – the people of Israel – let them be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

There's a plan, you see.

But, this woman doesn't back down . . . she doesn't back away . . . because she's there not for herself . . . she's there for her daughter. She takes the insult . . . she even takes it on herself . . . she owns it . . . and she remains respectful even when Jesus is not! In that moment she becomes more Christ-like than Jesus! "Sir," she says, "I know you've got a plan . . . and that's fine . . . but, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs!" Basically, she is saying: "I know it's not right that I am here . . . it mightn't fit the plan at this stage . . . and I know I don't deserve anything from you, but I'm here because there's something more important than your plan . . . there's something even more important than God's grand plan for the world . . . there's my daughter!"

And, it's like a light-bulb goes off in Jesus' head! This Gentile woman from the wrong side of the tracks has the nerve . . . the temerity . . . to go toe to toe with Jesus! Does she even know who she's talking to! Notice, this is not even about faith . . . there is no mention of the woman's faith in Mark's account . . . no, this woman simply cares for her daughter and she falls at Jesus' feet . . . unknowingly she comes before God in the flesh, and she pleads, not for what is right . . . no, she begs that he would be merciful.

There she is . . . at Jesus' feet . . . reminding God what it is to be God!

And, if that sounds strange . . . as if God needs to be reminded who God is! . . . it's not unprecedented. Abraham reminds God that God is merciful when he bargains for Sodom. The psalmists often remind God of God's mercy. God even places a rainbow in the sky to remind Godself of God's mercy. And, here, it is a Syrophoenician woman . . . pleading for her daughter.

Which just goes to remind us that God is not just some supernatural being up there, out there somewhere pulling the strings on some grand plan . . . putting all the pieces of some cosmic puzzle into place. God is not some theological or philosophical idea to stimulate our minds. No, above all, God is mercy . . . and mercy has to be personal . . . which means God engages in the world . . . God engages with people . . . not with theoretical people, but with real flesh and blood people . . . and in the interaction . . . the interaction! . . . God's true self is shown.

So, the light bulb goes off in Jesus' head. "Go," he says to the woman, "Your daughter is free". This Gentile woman has out-Jesused Jesus! God's mercy is more than just a plan for the whole world . . . God's mercy is real . . . personally real . . . cutting through the names we call each other, and the ways we come up with to de-humanize and de-personalize each other . . . it's real for people . . . actual people . . . whoever they are and however they present.

It sounds messy, doesn't it? A God who shows mercy by engaging personally in the world. But, if mercy is messy, I doubt you'd get any complaints from an unnamed Syrophoenician woman and her daughter.

Yes, there's always a plan . . . there has to be. You and I make plans every day. Plans give us order and structure. It's how the world keeps turning . . . through the laws and structures of nature . . . the hours, the days, the seasons . . . and even when things are a bit chaotic we know the sun will rise tomorrow, because that's the plan! Even God has a plan. And, we could talk endlessly about what that plan might be . . . we can theologize and preach and teach and pontificate and theorize . . . we can have it all worked out and nailed down, but if we don't recognize the person in front of us . . . if the plan is not personal, then it's not worth much.

When God's mercy touches someone . . . personally . . . it does more than any theologizing, or sermonizing, or lecturing could ever do . . . it sets us free . . . free to live mercifully . . . free to care personally . . . free to engage messily.

That, I think, is the plan.

Amen.

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