

LIFE ELEVATED

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Grace Church in New York
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(Jesus) said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." (Mark 7:27)

Last month my family and I embarked on a Wild West vacation to see some of the national parks and natural wonders of the Rocky Mountain region. Soon after our plane landed in Salt Lake City, we rented a car and began loading our suitcases in the trunk. I noted the slogan on the Utah license plate, "Life Elevated," and assumed it pertained to the benefits of living in the state's high elevations. In fact, "Life Elevated" has been the official tourism slogan of Utah for over ten years now. Apparently, its highly imaginative predecessor, "Utah!" (that's the word "Utah" with an exclamation point) was considered too vague, and a popular favorite, "The Greatest Snow on Earth" too specific to the skiing industry. So "Life Elevated" it is.

After dinner on the first night, Stacie and I wanted to enjoy a glass of wine in our room before turning off the lights. Thus, I went down to the hotel bar, ordered a glass of white and a glass of red, and announced my intention to take them up to the room. The bartender frowned and said, "Oh, I can't allow you to take alcohol from the bar unless one of our employees escorts you to your room." I was partly puzzled, partly amused, but agreeable to the plan. Soon, with a glass in each hand, I was following a young woman back to the room. She said to me, "Sorry that we have to do this." I replied, "Is this a Mormon thing?" "Yep," she said. "It's a Mormon thing." We walked on in silence until she said, "I take it you're not a Mormon." "No, I'm not," said I. "Neither am I," she added.

The next night I wanted to do the same thing – bring two glasses of wine to our room – but the bartender was short on staff and couldn't provide me with an escort. I asked him, "Can I be trusted to go directly to my room?" He replied, "OK, you can be trusted." Let the record state that I proved myself worthy of the bartender's trust. I strayed neither to the right nor the left, but went straight back to the room. Along the way it did occur to me that "Life Elevated" wasn't quite the slogan to describe the experience of religious rules and regulations. "Life Supervised" might have been a better fit.

In today's reading from the Gospel of Mark we've heard the curious encounter between Jesus and a Syrophenician woman. The scene is troubling, and over the centuries many faithful Christians have wished it weren't in the Gospels at all, even though it appears twice – in Matthew as well as in Mark. What happened was this: after an especially intense period of ministering to needy crowds and answering the challenges of the hostile religious authorities, Jesus and his disciples traveled to the region of Tyre and Sidon. The journey was approximately thirty miles, and we can assume they covered the distance on foot. They found a place to stay, and Jesus intended to lay low for a bit, rest, and prepare himself for whatever might come next.

Nevertheless, his reputation preceded him. Mark tells us that he could not escape notice, and immediately a Gentile woman entered the house and began pleading with Jesus to heal her daughter. What would he do? Well, we've already seen how Jesus, under similar circumstances, ignored his own exhaustion and ministered with compassion to anyone who asked for it. He raised Jairus' daughter to life after she had died, and multiplied the loaves and fish for five-thousand hungry people in the wilderness. Surely, we think, Jesus would respond heroically once again and heal the woman's daughter. Think again. Mark 7:27 reads, *He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."*

Today is the second Sunday of September, which means that the NFL opens its season this weekend, while college football is already underway. If you happen to be a fan and watch any games you might see someone in the stands holding up a sign that reads “John 3:16.” Of course, John 3:16 is the Scripture verse that contains the essence of the gospel: that God loves the world, and sent Jesus so that no one need perish, but all might have everlasting life. Life elevated, indeed. Tim Tebow, when he was a college quarterback, would paint the verse in the black sunblock under his eyes. Holding up John 3:16 is a way that some people want to share the goodness of God. Well I guarantee you that no well-meaning Christian today or ever will be holding up a sign that reads Mark 7:27. *“Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”* It sounds unnecessarily harsh, rude, and exclusive. Life Elevated is hardly what comes to mind when you hear it.

What could Jesus possibly have been thinking? As you might imagine, theories abound. Some say the whole thing can be explained by the problems of translating from Aramaic to Greek to English. Jesus didn’t really mean to say “throw it to the dogs.” What he actually said was, “throw it to the puppies.” It seems to me that we simply get Jesus into a different sort of trouble by arguing that he called the woman a puppy rather than a dog. Another theory comes from a justice perspective. Tyre was a wealthy Gentile city that gobbled up the best resources of the land, produced by the surrounding Jewish peasants, who themselves ate what didn’t or wouldn’t sell in the market.¹ Thus, when the well to-do woman from Tyre came into the house and interrupted Jesus’ rest, his first instinct was to side with the oppressed before healing the woman’s daughter. But the most popular theory argues that the woman simply beat Jesus in a verbal sparring match, and in so doing, jolted him into realizing that his mission should include the Gentiles, and not the Jews alone. It was time for a new way between Gentiles and Jews, and the woman inadvertently set Jesus going along the more enlightened, elevated path.

The problem with most of the theories is that they read more into the text than is actually there. And what of the popular theory that the woman opened Jesus’ eyes to a new way? The problem here is that according to the chronology of Mark’s Gospel, Jesus was already on the new way, and forcefully teaching it. Immediately before today’s passage, Mark tells us how Jesus challenged the absurdity of all the religious rules and restrictions that the Pharisees and Scribes had added to the Law of Moses. The traditions of the elders, most especially the laws of purity must be obeyed, argued the religious authorities. They insisted that the only way to live a holy, elevated life in communion with God was knowing the difference between clean and unclean. Certain foods and certain people were untouchable, and would defile anyone who came in contact with them. Pots and pans and bronze kettles had to be washed a certain way or they, too, or they would pass along impurities. Really? God cares about pots and pans and cups? Jesus would argue that it’s not what goes into the stomach, but what comes out from the heart that can defile a person.

Clearly, at some point Jesus concluded that the way of the Pharisees and Scribes with all their accretions to the Law did not lead to life elevated. Theirs was a recipe for life supervised, even life suppressed. Jesus simply had a different vision for what life should be like under the reign of God. He called his vision the kingdom of God, or life eternal, or life abundant. Where did he get his ideas? We know for certain that he studied the Scriptures, and especially the prophet Isaiah. Today’s passage that we hear from Isaiah (35:4-7a) is one that Jesus likely knew well. It speaks of God’s will to unburden people: for the blind to see, the deaf to hear, the mute to speak, and the lame to leap like a deer. Isaiah also prophesied that God would remove the shroud of death that covers all nations (25:6-9). All nations, mind you, not the Jews. To press the point, Jesus decided to take his disciples to the thoroughly Gentile region of Tyre and Sidon. It would be one thing to talk about the life elevated, it would be another thing entirely to go live it in a place where it really mattered. So that’s where they went.

When the Gentile woman surprised them all by entering the house, Jesus seized on the opportunity to teach his disciples. It's as if he were thinking, "O.K. boys, let's put our Jewish laws of ritual purity on the stage. Let's treat this Gentile woman as the scribes and the Pharisees would have us treat her and experience in real time how that works out for all of us. Let's see what really defiles: this Gentile woman begging for her daughter's healing, or these words coming out of my mouth that I know are on your hearts." And so, playing perfectly the part of a ritually pure Jewish male, Jesus said in reply to her plea, "*Let the children first be fed, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.*" How would the woman respond? I don't think Jesus knew, but he trusted her to carry the scene. The disciples – the primary, intended audience of the exchange – heard her say, "*Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.*" I have no doubt that Jesus was impressed by her answer, but I also think he was inclined to heal her daughter no matter what she said. Was it fair to draft the woman into the drama, unsuspecting as she was? My guess is that she would have declared that the means absolutely justified the end. At the end of the day, her daughter was healed.

Where do you find yourself in the story? If you take the Bible to be God's inspired Word, and thirst for the riches it has to impart, then one way to drink deeply is to step into its scenes. Usually, the safest bet as to where we're supposed to find ourselves in the Gospels is in the role of the disciples themselves: the ones receiving the teachings of Jesus, and then going out in the world to put them in practice. Today's reading challenges us with the question of what it really means to live the life elevated. Does it have to do with what you shall eat, what you shall drink, and what shall wear? No. Be not anxious about these things, said the Lord Jesus. Instead, seek first the kingdom of God. Instead, practice what James, the brother of Jesus, calls "the royal law" in today's Epistle (James 2:1-17): *You shall love your neighbor as yourself.* What is more, Isaiah assures us that when the kingdom of God is fully inaugurated, the Lord of hosts will set before us a feast of fat things – of well-aged wines strained clear. And was it not the Lord Jesus himself who changed water into wine at a wedding in Cana of Galilee? The water, by the way, was set aside for the rituals of purity. Jesus changed it into the finest of wines, and still today trusts us to sample the goodness of God's creation.

On the other hand, perhaps you dare to take on the role of the Syrophenician woman in today's reading. If so, be prepared for God to use you in strange ways. God's calling is unpredictable, and comes without explanation. You enter a scene for your own purposes, and you find yourself drafted into another drama entirely with no script to follow. How did she play the part? Her tenacious faith in the goodness of God, and refusal to let go until she, too, could share in the blessings that Jesus had to offer are not only commendable, but consistent with life elevated. Life elevated can be as simple as this: hold fast to the goodness of God. Love your neighbor as yourself. As for the rest, don't sweat the details. God trusts you to carry the scene. God trusts you to carry the wine of life.

When I was newly ordained, the rector of the church I first served would begin every one of his sermons with a simple, yet eloquent prayer. It can be our prayer, too, as we begin a new program year together, and strive for the life abundant that is ours in Christ Jesus.

O God, grant us a right perspective between that which comes first in our lives, and that which follows after. And when we would make much of that which cannot matter much to you, restore us to our right perspective and profession, which is Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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¹ The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VIII, p. 610.