

“Tenacious Love”

“They were astounded beyond measure, saying, ‘He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.’”

Her legal name was Theresa Marie Brown, but everyone knew her as “Tenacious Terry.” Terry was a person who could always be depended on to help a person in need, no matter if that person was a family member or close friend or someone she barely knew. She was the person who would always check in on her elderly neighbours to make certain that they were well, and who would run errands for them and even bring them meals. She drove people to medical appointments and would visit people in the hospital and sit with them for hours if needed. She was also a relentless advocate for persons who needed an ally at times of crisis or when a person was a victim of injustice or abuse. When Terry took up a cause, she was relentless, never giving up until the person for whom she was advocating received the results they deserved. People in positions of power and authority would often cringe when they saw Tenacious Terry approaching them, knowing that this person would not give them a moment’s peace until she received the answers or actions that she sought on behalf of others. The tenaciousness of Terry was a source of comfort and blessing for persons who are often overlooked or victimized.

It often takes a person with tenacity to assist us and help us get the results that we need in times of crisis or distress. A tenacious person can be relentless, but the source of this persistent determination and doggedness is their love and caring for the needs of others. A tenacious person is often a loving person whose love is expressed in actions that will not quit until they accomplish their goals for the benefit of others.

The tenacity that was at the heart of Terry’s advocacy for others can be seen in the woman who approaches Jesus in today’s Gospel lesson to advocate for her daughter. It is a story in which Jesus crosses the border into Gentile territory: *“From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there.”* (Mark 7:24). The boundaries that were set aside in Jesus’ previous treatment of the purity rules in the “tradition of the elders” (7:5) are now crossed as Jesus ventures into a territory where no one from among his people would dare set foot. It appears that Jesus’ motivation for this move was to get away from the crowds for some “down time”; but even across the border, *“he could not*

escape notice.” Even in this region, word had spread about him and his healing power. This becomes apparent when “*a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet.*” (7:25). As Jesus had broken through the barrier set by people of his time by venturing into territory that was considered “unclean,” the woman who approaches Jesus on behalf of her daughter also breaks through every traditional barrier that would have prevented her from approaching Jesus. Mark identifies her as “*a Gentile, a woman of Syrophenician origin*” (7:26; in Matthew she is identified as “*a Canaanite woman*” – Matthew 15:22). This identification means that “*she is implicitly impure, one who lives outside of the land of Israel and outside of the law of Moses, a descendant of the ancient enemies of Israel.*” (Elizabeth Johnson). As a woman, unaccompanied by a husband or male relative, who initiates a conversation with a strange man, the woman is violating yet another societal taboo. But despite all these barriers that should have kept her away from Jesus, she is tenacious as she “*begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.*” While we are told of how this demon affected her daughter, it resulted in her being ostracized in her own community, much less among people who already looked at her as an unclean outsider. But none of these barriers or restrictions prevented her from approaching the man she believed had the power to heal her daughter; her tenacious love inspired her to overcome whatever restrictions were placed before her on behalf of the child she so dearly loved.

We would expect that Jesus would see the woman’s tenacious love for her daughter and grant her the healing she requests; but Jesus’ response is both unexpected and shocking. In Matthew’s account, the woman pleads with Jesus to “*have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon:*” (15:22). At first, Jesus does not answer her at all, while his disciples urge him to “*send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.*” (15:23). When Jesus does respond, he states that “*I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel*” (15:24), which follows his previous instructions to his disciples to “*go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel*” (10:5-6). Mark does not include this exchange; instead, Jesus’ response to the mother’s earnest plea on behalf of her daughter is shocking: “*Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs*” (7:27). While some have sought to lessen the harshness of this statement, there is no way to sugarcoat what Jesus says: the “children” in this statement are the children of Israel, while the “dogs” (*kunaria*) are understood to be all other peoples. Referring to someone as a “dog” was usually an insult intended to degrade those of whom it was used:

- “The Philistine said to David, ‘Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?’” – 1 Samuel 17:43.
- “Like a dog that returns to its vomit is a fool who reverts to his folly.” – Proverbs 26:11.
- “The dogs have a mighty appetite; they never have enough. The shepherds also have no understanding; they have all turned to their own way, to their own gain, one and all.” – Isaiah 56:11.

While Jesus appears to be quoting a bit of Jewish folk wisdom, this does not lessen the sting of his statement. While we cannot know exactly what Jesus was thinking when he responded in such a manner, it appears that he is informing this outsider of the limits of his mission, of his call to serve his own people – even though he has chosen to cross over into Gentile territory where this encounter happens.

One person who is neither surprised nor shocked by Jesus’ words is the tenacious mother who responds to Jesus with a clever aphorism of her own: *“Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”* (7:28). The Syrophenician woman’s reply shows that she can engage the challenge posed by Jesus’ saying better than even his own disciples. This form of oral combat requires the ability to respond with a saying of equal power; her response uses the ambiguity surrounding the term “dog” to turn the demeaning metaphor to her advantage. *“Her retort reverses the prejudices on both sides of the debate.”* (Pheme Perkins).

It becomes apparent that the mother’s tenacity has been rewarded when Jesus responds to her retort by proclaiming that *“for saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter”* (7:29). While Jesus never comes into the young girl’s presence, when the mother returns home she *“found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone”* (7:30). The tenacious love of this mother gave her the courage to overcome even the established prejudices that often prevented her people from accessing the gracious power that was present in Jesus; even Jesus must agree that *“God’s love and healing power know no ethnic, political, or social boundaries”* (Johnson). While the mother’s tenacity results in the healing miracle she desires for her daughter, the real miracle here is the overcoming of prejudice and the boundaries that separate persons:

- “Mark had Jesus enter Gentile territory to be alone, not to engage in a mission. The exchange with the woman points toward the future in which Gentiles will be included; their faith will bring them to salvation.” – Perkins.”

Jesus’ granting the request of the tenacious mother approves this woman’s attitude and provides for the early church a warrant for its mission to the Gentiles by

grounding that mission in the earthly ministry of Jesus himself, who would commission the disciples to “*make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*” (Matthew 28:19).

Another example of tenacious love that will break through any barrier that will prevent the one for whom we are advocating to receive what they need is in the next episode in which Jesus “*went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis*” (7:31). The Decapolis (“ten cities”) was also Gentile territory. Again, the Evangelist provides us with no explanation for this journey; Jesus may still be seeking an escape for rest that had alluded him in Tyre, or he may have a new vision for his mission beyond his home territory. Whatever the reason for his presence in the Decapolis, once again Jesus does not escape notice: “*They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment of speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him*” (7:32). As in the previous story of persons whose tenacious love for their paralyzed friend inspire them to remove the roof of the house where Jesus was residing so that they might lower the man down on a mat, these friends bring their deaf friend to Jesus and plead for his healing. The word used to describe the man’s infirmity (*magilalon*) appears only here and in Isaiah 35:5-6: “*Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.*” The occurrence of this word in Mark points to the glorious fulfillment of God’s saving purposes; in Jesus, the eschatological reign of God is present.

The account of the healing of this man includes parallels to the previous story of the raising of Jairus’ daughter. As Jesus put the crowd outside before he went in to where the body of the child was lying (5:40), Jesus “*took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and spat and touched his tongue*” (7:33). Likewise, Mark quotes Jesus speaking in his native Aramaic in speaking his command that results in the miracle:

- “He took her by the hand and said to her, ‘Talitha cum, ‘which means, ‘Little girl, get up!’ And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about” – 5:41.
- “Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, ‘Ephphatha,’ that is, ‘Be opened.’ And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.” – 7:34-35.

Both stories end with Jesus’ command for those who had witnessed the miracle to tell no one; but while those who had witnessed the raising of Jairus’ daughter appear to obey Jesus’ command, when following the healing of the man at the Decapolis “*Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously*

they proclaimed it" (7:36). This charge to tell no one indicates that further unfolding of the Gospel story is needed to understand the full import of this miracle; but the witness of the crowd enhances Jesus' reputation as one who "*has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak*" (7:37). The crowd recognizes that Jesus is the one who is the fulfillment of the salvation promised by the prophets and is to be praised for these activities; "*healings of blind, deaf, and disabled persons are all signs of the arrival of the messianic age.*" (Perkins).

In both stories, Jesus declares all persons clean, whether a Gentile woman in a pagan city or a man of indeterminate race in the unclean territory of the Decapolis. Both stories affirm that there is no hiding the revelation of Jesus:

- "All the miracles of Jesus are witness to the extraordinary power at work in him and evidence that in him the kingdom of God is at hand. Both stories point to the universal scope of God's gracious action in Christ." – Lamar Williamson, Jr.

The tenacity that inspired both the Syrophenician woman and the friends in the Decapolis to advocate for those they loved is also a witness to their faith in the tenacious love of God that is present in Jesus Christ. The mother knows that Jesus is the one who embodies the love of God that desires that all of God's children enjoy the abundance of life that are God's Will for all humanity, and that even Jesus' seemingly harsh words are meant to present another obstacle that is to be overcome once and for all. These one-time outsiders know that God's love is for all persons, and that their faith is rooted in the word of hope that "*the steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness*" (Lamentations 3:22-23). They know that because the Lord is the shepherd of all peoples that God's steadfast presence will always be a source of nourishment, comfort, and protection, because it is the word of hope that "*surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever*" (Psalm 23:5-6). They know that the one whom the approach for healing on behalf of those they love is the one whose tenacious love is the inspiration for seeking out all who are lost and rejoicing in the manner of the loving father who invited all to celebrate when "*this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!*" (Luke 15:24). Our faith in the tenacious, steadfast love of God in Jesus Christ invites us to be as steadfast and tenacious in our prayers and requests; in the Sermon of the Mount, Jesus invites his followers to approach him with the same tenacity displayed by the people who would allow any obstacle to stand in the way of the healing they sought for those they loved:

- “Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you, then who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him?” – Matthew 7:7-11.

We are called to be as tenacious as the Syrophenician woman and the friends in the Decapolis in bringing our prayers of intercession before God on behalf of others. We are called to *“cast all your anxiety upon him, because he cares for you”* (1 Peter 5:7), and to *“not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God”* (Philippians 4:6). We come to God in prayer with tenacity and confidence, knowing that *“we need not be in doubt because of our unworthiness, and need not be afraid, but may believe with complete certainty that our prayers are always answered when we pray believing in Christ.”* (Martin Luther, *Table Talk*).

As Tenacious Terry’s name and reputation were rooted in her love for others that inspired her actions and advocacy, may we be tenacious in loving one another, in bringing our prayers to our God of tenacious love, and in serving all people following the example of our tenacious Lord who gave of himself so that we might live in the blessed hope of the everlasting life that is rooted in the love of God that will never let me know, the tenacity of our Lord and Saviour whose steadfast love endures forever.

Amen.