

Boundless Grace for All Humankind

by

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Juneteenth

Mark 7:24-37

²⁴From 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. Yet he could not escape notice, ²⁵but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. ²⁶Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷He 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.” ²⁸But she answered him, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” ²⁹Then he said to her, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.” ³⁰So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

³¹Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. ³²They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. ³³He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. ³⁴Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” ³⁵And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. ³⁶Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. ³⁷They were astounded beyond measure, saying, “He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.”

Today is a day of celebration! It's Father's Day when we thank God for the nurture, love, care and support a father showers upon a child. Father's Day actually grew out of the first Mother's Day celebrations, when Anna Reeves Jarvis began to care for the impoverished children of Appalachia. After the Civil War, she declared a Mother's Day to promote reconciliation among the families of former Confederate and Union soldiers in her home state of West Virginia. Not long after the idea of Mother's Day began to spread across the country, in 1908 a West Virginia church sponsored an event to celebrate fathers after a coal mine explosion took the lives of 362 men.

We won't find that history of Father's Day on a Hallmark card, but as people of faith it is worth remembering that its inspiration was a Christian outreach first to the lives lost during the Civil War after its gains to end slavery, and then to a mining accident that claimed the lives of so many fathers among the poor of Appalachia.

Today is also Juneteenth, our newest federal holiday, created just last year to commemorate the end of slavery in America. It had taken more than two years after President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation to get that liberating word to Galveston, Texas, on June 19th, 1865, to announce the thousands of people still enslaved there were free. Juneteenth came to national prominence in 2020 following the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor at the hands of police when again our country's ongoing need for racial reconciliation became so violently exposed. Congress passed the Juneteenth National Independence Day Act last June with unanimous consent, to quote the bill's sponsor Senator Markey: "to address the long-ignored gap in our history, recognize the wrong that was done, acknowledge the pain and suffering of generations of slaves and their descendants, and finally celebrate their freedom."¹

¹ Senator Ed Markey, June 16, 2021, [usatoday.com](https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2021/06/16/senator-ed-markey-juneteenth-act/8111110002/).

While both the beginnings of Father's Day and Juneteenth reach back in time to memorialize moments of liberation and reconciliation, we know we have so much more work to do. The rise of white supremacy groups in the United States has been named the largest terrorist threat our country currently faces. From the Proud Boys to the Patriot Front, these groups are homophobic and racist. Just last week dozens of White Supremacists were arrested in Idaho before they could act on plans to riot at a local Pride event. They arrived last week in Idaho coming from ten different states that span the country from Texas to Oregon to Virginia.

These groups are spinning their racist theories online through social media and inspiring people like the man who sought out an African American neighborhood in Buffalo to shoot thirteen people, killing ten, in a grocery store. He described himself as a white supremacist voicing support for the Great Replacement Conspiracy Theory. That theory was originally advanced in the 19th century; it was foundational to Hitler's political rhetoric as he rose to power in Germany.

Its present expression began with a Frenchman who applied the theory to Muslims migrating to France. In the United States, it is directed mostly at Hispanic and African American populations. Simply put, it erroneously blames migration patterns on liberal elites, ironically and often identified as "Jews". These white supremacist groups say these liberal elites are organizing a grand plan to replace white people.² You remember what the torch-bearing rioters chanted in Charlottesville four years ago, "You will not replace us."

Now, lest we think the rise of white supremacy and these radical expressions of racism can be relegated to extreme fringe groups, we have to acknowledge this theory is taking hold in mainstream political

² Thanks to my friend, Joe Clifford, who summarized this theory's history in a sermon at Myers Park Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, "The Divine Conspiracy," 5/22/22.

discourse and media, and people of faith need not only be aware of it, but also work against it. For this is how close to home overt forms racism can come.

Last week, the General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church met on the campus of Eastern University, four and a half miles and twelve minutes from here. They were just renting space from Eastern for their annual meeting. The Orthodox Presbyterian Church broke off from our predecessor denomination during the fundamentalist-Modernist controversy in the 1920's. Led by a professor who left Princeton Seminary in protest of teaching evolution and who objected to treating black people as equals, the denomination does not ordain women to any office and it maintains extremely conservative views on most social issues.

According to the journal *Christianity Today*, at their Assembly last week, so many racist comments were made to students of color working on the university campus, that Eastern came close to kicking them out for violating their contract and not respecting the university's policy on racism. Some of the comments those church leaders made to students of color I cannot repeat here, but multiple comments were made to black students about their quote, "slave labor." Ultimately the Orthodox Presbyterians issued a public apology for their racism, but the online chatter that followed indicated that racism is rampant among this so-called Christian denomination.³

That was last week among an outside group using space at Eastern University, a Christian school with deep commitments to social justice, whose baccalaureate we hold in this sanctuary every year. I don't mean simply to disparage another church denomination. My point is this. We are never far from the racist ideologies or violence that have always been an insidious undercurrent in American life, and which are now

³ Daniel Silliman, "Orthodox Presbyterians Apologize for Racism at General Assembly," christianitytoday.org, 6/14/22.

gaining in strength, endorsed by far too many Americans, and are being perpetrated by a large segment of congregations who call themselves Christian.

This is not who we are called to be. We who follow Jesus Christ, in whom the Bible tells us God was reconciling the world. Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, after all, was not a white evangelical Christian; he was a person of color, a Palestinian Jew. Christ is calling us anew to understand systemic racism, to dismantle it in our hearts, to dismantle it in our communities, and to learn how to be anti-racists.

The gospels point out a number of places where Jesus just takes off, to be by himself for peace and quiet, to stock up his own reserves to keep on serving God and those who were hungering for God's grace. Today's gospel says: *Jesus set out and went away and entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there.* Mark tells us Jesus was a long way from home, in a pagan land, among non-Jewish people, and there was presumably no reason for Jesus to go there other than for a little down time on the Mediterranean shore. But evidently people in Tyre had heard enough about Jesus' healing powers that a woman seeking help for her little girl comes begging.

What follows is not a pleasant healing story nor a pretty Sunday School portrait of Jesus. The woman is described by Mark as a Greek, Syrophenician by birth. She is identified not by name, but by gender, race and as a non-religious outsider. She was desperate. "To love another, as you love your child," Frederick Buechner has written, "is to become vulnerable in a whole new way. It is no longer only through what happens to yourself that the world can hurt you but through what happens to the one you love also."⁴

We can imagine the ache and anxiety this woman felt, when here comes the healer from Galilee, and she begs for her child. The words

⁴ Frederick Buechner, *Now and Then*.

that come out of Jesus' mouth are brusque at best, insulting at worst, and even the most skillful of Biblical commentators are unable to gloss over the bad aftertaste that lingers when all is said and done. The woman pleads with Jesus to heal her daughter, but Jesus says, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Jesus wants the woman to know, and in turn, Mark wants us to know that the gospel came first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles. The persecuted first century Jewish Christians hearing the gospel needed that reassurance. But whatever its intent, the good news for us is that the story doesn't stop at Jesus' insult.

To the credit of the Syrophenician mother, who ignored the initial offense of Jesus' words and responded with dogged determination, we have this remarkable snapshot of Jesus. A new vision of God's promise that all the families of the earth will be blessed is taking root. Gender, race and religion were the three big boundaries religious people never crossed, and Jesus crossed every single one of them. There is no boundary limit to God's grace.

Jesus is imploring us in our time to hear that no boundaries of race that we use to separate one group from another have a place in the realm of God or in human community. How do we know this? After he heals the woman's daughter, Jesus moves on to a huge crowd of people bringing a man who is deaf and mute. Jesus puts his fingers in his ears to open them to hearing; he touches his tongue and moves it to speak plainly. The reason the healing of the deaf person is told immediately after Jesus demonstrates his boundary breaking grace is he wants us to hear it, and take it to heart, and to talk plainly about how God's grace has no boundaries of race, nationality, gender, station in life.

In his book *How to Be an Antiracist* Ibram Kendi very helpfully likens racism to cancer. "We can survive metastatic racism," he writes hopefully. But "pain is usually essential to healing. When it comes to healing America of racism, we want to heal America without pain, but without pain, there is no progress." We need to saturate the body politic

with the chemotherapy of anti-racist policies, shrink the tumors of racial inequities, ensure there are clear margins and only the healthy cells of equity remain. But before we can treat, Kendi says, we must believe. We must “believe that racist power is not godly. We must believe in the possibility that we can strive to be anti-racist from this day forward. If we fight to create an anti-racist world, then we give humanity a chance to survive, a chance to live in communion, a chance to be forever free.”⁵

When he heals the child of the Syrophenician woman, Jesus is giving us a chance to live in an anti-racist world, to live in communion, a chance to be forever free. God’s grace accepts no boundaries between races. And neither should we.

Amen.

⁵ Ibram Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, p. 236-8.