

# Your God Is Too Small

## Mark 7: 24-27

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### Mark 7: 24-27

*And from there he arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And he entered a house, and would not have any one know it; yet he could not be hid. But immediately a woman, whose little daughter was possessed by an unclean spirit, heard of him, and came and fell down at his feet. Now the woman was a Greek, a Syrophenician by birth. And she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. And he said to her, "Let the children first be fed, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." And he said to her, "For this saying you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter." And she went home, and found the child lying in bed, and the demon gone.*

*Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, through the region of the Decapolis. And they brought to him a man who was deaf and had an impediment in his speech; and they besought him to lay his hand upon him. And taking him aside from the multitude privately, he put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue; and looking up to heaven, he sighed, and said to him, "Eph'phatha," that is, "Be opened." And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. And he charged them to tell no one; but the more he charged them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, "He has done all things well; he even makes the deaf hear and the dumb speak."*



In 1953 J. B. Phillips wrote a book called, **YOUR GOD IS TOO SMALL**. It is a short book, 140 pages. It uses masculine language for God and for people, a throwback to another era. But even though its language may be dated, its message is very timely.

The 1950's were interesting years, too often characterized by a laissez faire description, typified by "Leave It to Beaver", "Ozzie and Harriet" and President Eisenhower on the golf course. It was a time of cultural struggle. The post war generation America was torn between wanting to go back to a simpler life where race, gender, and religion were clearly defined and generally accepted and, on the other hand, people wanting change. So, while the television played peaceful situation comedies with stereotypical families, there were race riots, free speech demonstrations, and an undercurrent of protestations from different groups who were not satisfied with turning back the cultural clock.

Into this mix came J.B. Phillips book. It made a splash, but not a big enough one for most people to know about it. Society was not much interested in a book that challenged its concept of God, a book that criticized how God was perceived, described, and addressed. In that sense, things have remained pretty much the same. God-talk is uncomfortable for most people. And that is a shame.

Marcus Borg, a teacher of religion and a scholar of Christianity, has written many books about God and about Jesus. One of these books (**THE GOD WE NEVER KNEW**) will be discussed by our Spiritual Growth Working Group on various Wednesdays in the coming months. Borg writes in the tradition of J. B. Phillips. He invites us to explore who God is for us, and who God is not. At a lecture at University Congregational Church, Borg described what it was like to talk with people who said they did not believe in God. He engaged them in a wonderful way. Rather than try to convince them through argument or logic, Borg would say to them: "So, tell me about the god that you do not believe in." And some of them would, and Borg would respond by saying that he did not believe in that god either.

In J.B. Phillips' book, he begins by describing the "unreal" gods. They include;

1. Resident Policeman
2. Parental Hangover
3. Grand Old Man
4. Meek-and-Mild
5. Absolute Perfection
6. Heavenly Bosom
7. God-in-a-Box
8. Managing Director
9. Second-Hand God
10. Perennial Grievance
11. Pale Galilean
12. Projected Image

I will not use this time to describe what Phillips means by these terms. I imagine you can figure out how these concepts are limiting to a healthy, meaningful God-image, hence the title of the book: **YOUR GOD IS TOO SMALL.**

Our gospel lesson today brings this message home in a narrative form. Jesus encounters a woman. He was often encountering women. Interestingly enough, when Jesus encounters women, it is an opportunity for the reader, or the hearer, to pay special attention. Something is happening. Something is going to happen. Pay attention. God is at work.

This woman is not a Jew. Yet she seeks out this Jewish teacher, she kneels down before him, she begs him to help her by doing something to heal her daughter's condition, demon possession. We do not know for certain what demon possession means. Could it be epilepsy, schizophrenia? We don't know. We do know, or the story makes it clear, that there is deep suffering here. And that we can relate to.

But Jesus pushes her away. He says that he has come for the Jews. They are the human ones, the children. Other people are animals, dogs. It is not right for his energy, healing, divine work, to go where it was not intended to go.

We could freeze frame the story here and talk about our image of Jesus and how this story does not fit our image. The Jesus we know would never say such a thing, do such a thing. Yet, here it is. We can try to explain it away, but that is not easy to do. Nor should we. This story is here for a reason. I believe it is here to show us that God is bigger than we make God out to be.

The woman does not cry out, complain, or lash out. She responds by saying, *"Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."* Whoa! Gotcha, Jesus. Something is happening. God is at work. To which Jesus responds, "Your child is healed."

I believe God created us. I believe God created everything, and that it was and is good. The manner of God's creation is beyond my understanding. Yet I do understand that my limitations are many and frequently encountered. As Paul says, I do not do the good I intend. But when I hear this story about the foreign woman who challenges Jesus' mission, who teaches Jesus something about God and God's expanding love, then I know that I, too, have the possibility of growing with God. I, too, like Jesus, can see God in people whom I once did not see God. I, too, can change and be used by God in new ways to further God's realm of love.

I believe our God is always too small. That is part of our being human. We can respond to this reality by putting up walls, creating defenses, closing our eyes and our minds and our hearts to new ways of seeing God, or we can risk being foolish and out of control, trusting that God will care for us as we bumble along on our faith journey.

Let's risk being foolish, for God's sake. Let's trust God will not take us down the path without accompanying us along the way, helping us climb, navigate, crawl, even fall into places of grace and service.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.