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Transcript of: "The Struggle for a Place at the Table: Jesus and the Syrophenician Woman"

**Presented on July 22, 2022 by
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Meghan De Dios:

Thank you, Kara. Hello, everyone. Welcome to today's presentation, the Struggle for a Place at the Table-- Jesus and the Syrophenician Woman. It is my pleasure to introduce our speaker.

Maria Pascuzzi is a Sister of St. Joseph in Brentwood, New York. She's a member of the leadership team of her congregation and is also the current director of Spirit Alive, the CSJ Institute for Faith, Inquiry, and Education. Sister Pascuzzi earned a doctorate in biblical theology from the Pontifical Gregorian University and a licentiate in sacred Scripture from the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome, Italy. She has taught biblical studies in both seminaries and universities. Sister Pascuzzi was a tenured professor at the University of San Diego and the inaugural director of UCSD's Center for Catholic Thought and Culture before heading back East to assume administrative roles most recently at Seton Hall University School of Theology.

She specializes in the letters of Paul and was part of the team tasked by the US Conference of Catholic Bishops to provide a fresh translation of Paul's letters. She has authored books and essays for both academic and popular publications. Sister Pascuzzi's most recent publication, A Commentary on 2 Corinthians, is included in the third revised edition of The Jerome Biblical Commentary for the 21st century. Her essay entitled, The God From Whom all Things Come-- God and 1 Corinthians is included in the collection of essays from the Catholic Biblical Association Paul seminar, which will be published in the Catholic biblical quarterly imprint series in early 2023. She is an active member of the Catholic Biblical Association of America and served two terms as associate editor of the Catholic Biblical Quarterly. She was born and raised in Brooklyn, New York where she currently resides. We are thrilled to have her with us today for our 13th Annual Mary Magdala celebration. Please join me in welcoming Sister Pascuzzi.

Sister Maria Pascuzzi:

Thank you for welcoming me. Before I begin with my own formal comments, I was just asked by Ms. Houlihan-- I don't know if you noticed. I did. But somehow, the reading from today's gospel got cut off, shortened. And we would be remiss on this feast of Mary Magdalene to not listen to the rest of the story. So before I begin, the rest of the story.

[APPLAUSE]

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and she wept. She bent over to look into the tomb. And she saw two angels in white sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet.

They said to her, woman, why are you weeping? She said to them, they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him. When she had said this, she turned and saw Jesus standing there, but she did

not know that it was Jesus.

Jesus said to her, woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking? Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.

Jesus said to her, Mary. She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni," which means 'my teacher.' Jesus said to her, do not hold on to me because I have not yet ascended to the Father.

But go to my brothers and sisters, and say to them, I am ascending to my father and your father, to my God and your God. Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord." And she told them that he had said these things to her.

So thank you. Good afternoon, and thank you. I am very happy to be-- I was a little nervous. I'm a rabid Yankee fan, as my friend, Tom Stegman knows. And we just gave the Sox a licking.

But anyway, I am very happy to be here with all of you in this room. And I understand that many of you are joining through live streaming. And I'm especially grateful to see my friend, Tom Stegman. He and I shared a number of years together in the Paul Seminar at the Catholic Biblical Association and a number of other distinguished guests here and to learn Ms. Houlihan's benefaction of this event, which is a wonderful thing. And I am very honored to be here.

I can't remember exactly when I received the invitation to participate in this lecture series. I think I was originally scheduled to come in some other year. But then as with so many things, COVID struck.

Since receiving the invitation, my life has taken a number of terms out of academics. So I'm no longer a full-time academic, but I am the director of a new program, a new educational program online called Spirit Alive. And then a few months later in April 2021, I was elected to my congregational leadership team.

Both my work in Spirit Alive and as a member of my community's leadership team have allowed me to listen to and join in conversations with individuals and communities of people that I really hadn't engaged before, or at least, not in any extended way. As someone from Brooklyn who's a member of a diocesan community, I've spent a lot of my life off of Long Island in different places. So just becoming a member of the leadership team has brought me into more extensive contact with the sisters in my own community and listening to them about their experience in the Church.

The conversations have been expansive and have brought me to reconsider how scholarly interpretation of texts are received by people who fit into some group, which may experience marginalization or alienation in the Church or in society because of their race, or their gender, or sexual orientation, or social and economic status. So I decided I wanted to take a look at a text, both familiar and disconcerting, the episode involving the Syrophenician woman, which is narrated in Mark's Gospel, chapter seven versus 24 to 30.

One of the first things you discover when you do biblical studies is that depending on the interpretive lenses and the questions that a person brings to the text, a single scriptural passage can give rise to multiple, sometimes, contrasting interpretations, each intended to serve some purpose showcase a particular understanding. The same is true with regard to the passage about the Syrophenician woman. Depending on the interpretive lenses, the questions applied to the text, contrasting profiles of both Jesus and the woman emerge.

So today, I would like to begin with a review of the passage and then contrast mainstream and feminist interpretations. And my presentation today is framed by questions about how the interpretation of a text impacts the reader and relates to his or her lived experience. So let's start looking at this text.

After a controversial exchange with the scribes in the Pharisees about purity regulations and defilement, which was occasioned by the fact that scribes and Pharisees had come down from Jerusalem. And of course, they were surveilling Jesus and his disciples, and they noticed that they had not washed their hands.

So after this exchange, Jesus went off alone traveling North from upper Galilee to the region of Tyre in Phoenicia, a predominantly Gentile area. Jesus did not go to Tyre to engage in what we expect him to engage in his customary mission of teaching and healing. He went there to be alone and to seclude himself. And he goes into a house in an undisclosed location, hoping to go unnoticed, something that his fame apparently would not permit to happen. And in fact, his quiet, his retreat, was disrupted when an uninvited woman described as a Greek-- so

already, that gives us information about her language, her culture, and her religion, a Greek, pagan, a Syrophenician by birth, someone who was born in the Syrian part of Phoenicia, an outsider, therefore, in terms of culture, religion, and nationality.

This woman intrudes on his privacy to ask him to cast out unclean spirits from her daughter. Though Jesus's encounter with this woman takes up all of six verses in the Gospel of Mark, much has been written about its historicity, its purpose and placement in the gospel, and especially about the significance of the verbal exchange between Jesus and the woman. The exchange-- I'll say more about this later-- is located right in the center of this passage, and it is the focal point of this story.

This story is repeated in Matthew's gospel in chapter 15. And the gospel story over there is slightly different in terms of the details of the account. But it's interesting that the dialogue, even in Matthew's gospel, is almost verbatim, exactly what you find in Mark's gospel. So it's very important.

Now, two chapters earlier in Mark, Jesus had traveled into Gentile territory, and he freed a man, evidently a pagan, who lived in Gerasa. That was the man who had been possessed, and Jesus sent out all the legions of demoniac spirits into the pigs, if you remember. And that was in chapter five.

And then in the verses immediately following that episode, Jesus takes a boat across the Sea of Galilee back to Jewish territory, where he responds positively and without delay to the request of Jairus, a synagogue leader, to come to his house and heal his little daughter. So the reader has been led to expect that Jesus will respond positively to the Syrophenician mother who also asks his intercession on behalf of her little daughter. Instead, as we know, Jesus is unsympathetic and offensive and in a condescending metaphor that at face value is verbally abusive.

He compares her and her daughter to dogs, inferior to the children who sit at the table, and who must not only be fed first with the bread, but as the verb used here connotes, fed until they have eaten until they're full. It's not right, Jesus says, to throw the children's food to the dogs. This is not the first time Jesus has used animal metaphors to insult certain persons or groups of people.

Think about how he speaks about the Pharisees, calls them snakes and vipers. And even Herod was the old sly fox. But I think-- I have this right. I think it's the only time in the gospels that a woman is denigrated in such a manner and the only time the petitioner is refused.

So think about this for a minute. To a mother with a sick child, Jesus's tactless and heartless reply must have sounded especially cruel. The Jesus that we meet here does not fit with the traditional Christian portrait of Jesus as empathetic, gentle, and inclusive. Commentators and preachers, embarrassed by this portrait of Jesus, have approached this text with an eye to mitigating the harshness of his response and countering the perception that he is a narrow-minded sexist steeped in the religious and cultural prejudices of his day.

And so here, I want to briefly take a quick look at a few of the arguments advanced to rehabilitate Jesus in what I call mainstream standard approaches to this text. And I want to consider the profile of both Jesus and the Syrophenician woman that emerges as a result of their, what I would call, apologetic attempts. The first argument boils down to this. Jesus's words should not be taken at face value.

Despite what you hear, Jesus meant no offense, but was speaking facetiously in order to test her faith. And because she passed the test, Jesus heals her daughter and finds in her declaration of faith confirmation of his pre-planned missionary project to manifest God's power in favor of the Gentiles. So facetious, testing her, she passes the test, Jesus heals her daughter and finds in her declaration of faith confirmation of his pre-planned missionary program of reaching out to the Gentiles.

Not everyone agrees that Jesus was speaking facetiously or that he was even testing the woman and I think for good reason. The word, 'faith' is never used in this passage. Jesus performs other miracles or cures in this gospel where faith is not even named, so with regard to the leper, or the man with the withered hand, and even the Gerasene Demoniac. Nothing in the text suggests that Jesus is attempting to elicit a confession of faith, nor is it the case that when Jesus praises the woman in verse 29 that word in Greek *logos* must necessarily refer to a confession of faith that Jesus is Lord.

The woman is not called to discipleship, nor is she presented as one to observe and emulate like the poor

widow. Moreover, if her prostration at Jesus's feet even before she made the request is a mark of a believing response, as one scholar says, then why did Jesus need to test her? Didn't he recognize a faith response when he saw one?

What we know is that a desperate mother approached him with an ask on behalf of her child. As a non-Israelite pagan, she may have come to him without any thought whatsoever of his messianic christological identity. She may have come simply because his fame as a miracle worker, which had already spread through Tyre and Sidon, if you go back and read chapter three, had given her reason to hope to trust that he could help her daughter.

Further, there is no hint that she became a follower of Jesus. Perhaps, interpreters who insist that this is a faith test were influenced by the earlier story in Mark 5 where a woman healed of a years-long blood flow is explicitly commended for her faith or by Matthew's version of this episode where, again, a woman is explicitly commended for her faith. The second argument is-- or revolves around the word 'kunarion,' a diminutive form of the Greek word for dog.

In the biblical world and later, in Jewish tradition, dogs were generally looked upon as unclean mangy scavengers who roamed around outside the confines of the city feeding on carcasses, thus, to call someone a dog was an insult. And if you listened to Donald Trump for the last four years and heard him insulting every woman he's ever talked to and called her a dog, you realize that it's still an insult. A number of commentators argue that since Jesus used the diminutive 'kunarion' he was speaking playfully, referring to the woman and her child as puppies in order to convey affection for them.

This has led more than-- I'm telling you what the guys say. This has led more than one commentator to conclude that the woman would not have been offended at all. But this attempt to soften Jesus's reply and suggest that he was expressing affection for this pagan woman and her daughter is unpersuasive on a number of counts.

In the common Greek language of the day, diminutive forms did not necessarily carry diminutive force. And I was thinking about something that we would know today. I had a cousin. Her name was Mariette. I never really thought of her as little Mary. She was just Mariette.

People talk about going into the dinette area. It's not like you're sitting there expecting to be sitting at a mini table. It's just words we use with diminutives, same thing in Jesus's day.

Moreover, as TA Burkhill noted in his much cited comment about Jesus's remark to the woman-- and I'm quoting, so excuse the language. "To call a woman a little bitch is no less abusive than to call her a bitch without qualification."

[LAUGHTER]

In addition to these arguments, it has been suggested-- and this is one that I find funny and interesting at the same time. It was suggested that Jesus was really engaged in a conversation with himself about the scope of his mission and was only really half talking to the woman. Apart from the fact that this could be dismissed as pure speculation, it fails as a defense of Jesus because it suggests that he was not even paying attention to this desperate mother. But in thinking out loud about his mission, he kind of absentmindedly insults her. So to me, that's a classic case of adding insult to injury.

As you might expect from interpretations which have as one of their aims any way to defend Jesus, a picture emerges of him as a man unfazed by the incursion of this unchaperoned pagan woman living with a demon-possessed daughter coming into his private space when he wanted to be alone. He's completely in control of the situation. At worst, he is portrayed as what I call a benevolent offender actually doing her a favor by testing her to elicit a more profound declaration of faith by means of a degrading comparison, which various scholars insist was really not degrading.

The Syrophenician woman, on the other hand, is depicted as unworthy, impatient, not feeling at all offended, but showing deference and respect for Jesus whom she addresses as Lord. She is not challenging him with her reply about the crumbs, but acquiesces and accepts that she is subordinate to the children. She is willing to wait her turn while others are fed, willing to absorb any solve for the sake of her child. Her reply reinforces her humility.

In fact, more than one scholar, more than one, has remarked that she is quite satisfied, indeed, happy to

settle for a single crumb. To summarize, in some scholarly and popular literature, as a consequence of this apology for Jesus, the woman is featured as worthy of praise because of her faith in humility for accepting crumbs and her inferior status. She is characterized as the stereotypical-- in stereotypical terms as weak, submissive, and dependent on Jesus, on the man who has the power to grant her request if she passes the test.

Now, I have to admit when I was doing this, that part of me resonates with this desire to defend Jesus. I mean, I don't want to follow a mean, nasty, insulting Jesus, so I welcome the attempts to explain his unusual rudeness and to bring his image back into focus with the good and gentle Jesus we all know and loved since we were children. But as we have seen, to do that requires accepting that Jesus speaks either absentmindedly or tongue in cheek to a desperate woman or that he is just trying to test her and that his language really suggests a cozy domestic setting at a table and puppy playfulness.

All such arguments have been described by one scholar as, quote, "contortionist justifications to save a Caledonian Christ, the perfect God man, from criticism." Whether or not intentional, in the process of doing this, the woman is diminished. And that, of course, is the part that does not resonate with me and I imagine all of you, or many feminist interpreters, who have offered a contrasting reading of this encounter between Jesus and the Syrophenician woman.

So let's look at the other end of the interpretation spectrum, feminist interpretations. For obvious reasons, Mark 7:24-30 is a popular passage for feminist interpreters. Here is a text about a woman who is transparently humiliated and dehumanized that begs to be interpreted in a way that moves beyond the kind of androcentric Jesus-centric readings that we have just considered.

The steady stream of feminist readings focused on the woman and was focused on the woman not as an object of insult, but as a protagonist. Feminists do not cast her in this role gratuitously. They're not making it up.

But they point out that her role as protagonist is underscored in the text in two ways, first, by being portrayed as speaking face to face in direct speech with Jesus. This is the only time in Mark's gospel that a woman is portrayed so. And second, by the placement of her rejoinder in the structural center of the passage.

So think about the passage as a descending ladder that moves into this dialogue and then moves away from it. And right there in the center, you have a comment of Jesus. And then right dead in the center, you have her rejoinder. "But even the dogs can eat the crumbs that fall from the table." And then you have Jesus speak again.

So right there in the center, we have her words. We hear her voice. Moreover, her speech is introduced by the formula, she replied, and she said. And in Mark's gospel, we ordinarily hear, and he replied, and he said.

So Mark uses the words that are normally introduced to-- to introduce the speech of Jesus, he uses them for her, which of course, leads us or suggests to readers that she speaks as Jesus's equal. Most, though not all feminist interpreters, frame the story within Mark's larger theological concerns about the spread of the Jesus movement, which was deeply rooted in Judaism to non-Jews. As you can imagine, that raised all kinds of tensions associated with interculturality.

Though feminist interpretations vary in some ways, it's important to note that they share two assumptions. The first is this: Jesus really did intend his remark as an insult. There is no justifiable reason to avoid interpreting it in any other way.

This is a request that should have awakened his compassion, but clearly, he is unmoved by a mother's love and dedication for her daughter. Explanations for his abusive reply range from the woman's ethnicity, to her gender, to her behavior and violating social custom and demeanor that was expected of a woman, to her high social economic status and her complicity from that economic perch in oppressing Jewish peasants, to the fact that she was a pagan. Given the history of hostile relations between the Tyrians and Jews as well as the mother's disregard for social convention and behavior expected of a woman, it's understandable how some focus on either her ethnicity or gender as having elicited Jesus's rude reply.

However, Mark focuses on the fact that she is a Greek, a pagan, not a member of God's elect, unequivocally not a Jew. This is the primary identity marker which encompasses both her culture and language as well as her polytheistic practice. And that's what he lays out first.

So from this, I think we can reasonably conclude that Jesus's refusal has to do with the fact that she is a

pagan. Of course, her identity cannot be reduced to this single dimension. The fact is she is a gutsy female pagan who dares to transgress social norms and to speak a counter word in order to advance her own cause.

More than one author has insisted that gender is not essential to this episode. Every time I read that I laugh because can you imagine a guy getting that-- we don't give dogs to you? Boom. Take out Jesus. I mean, it's just inconceivable to me.

But more than one male scholar has said that gender has nothing to do with this. But her gender and her ethnicity are indispensable parts of her identity, and they do accentuate the tensions in this story. So they cannot be discounted.

Now, the second assumption is that the fully human Jesus-- and we don't stop to think about this too often, but you have to think about it; the fully human Jesus is able to change. He can be, as one scholar says, a teacher as well as a student. He can be persuaded to think differently, to have his missionary horizons broadened and to undergo transformation.

This assumption is fundamental to feminist interpretations of this passage, both academic and popular. Why? Because almost every such interpretation understands a reluctant Jesus engaged in an argument with this mother whose rejoinder-- "even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs" impresses him, elicits his change of mind, and secures from him the cure that she wanted for her daughter.

But what is that word, that *logos*, she spoke? And what did he hear? If her reply does not express submissive faith, then what does it communicate? And then in what did Jesus's change of mind consist, simply in his willingness to cure a pagan woman's daughter? He shouldn't have had a problem with that.

If you go and read the Old Testament and you read the story of the-- which is it? The story of Elijah with the woman of Zarephath, the pagan, he heals that woman's child. So it's not that a miracle worker was part of Israel could not.

So is it just that? Did he need to be convinced to do that, or was there something deeper? Was there something in her word that challenged him to change his mind about something more than the cure of this child?

In most feminist interpretations, the mother is seen as expressing a profound theological insight about the scope of Jesus's mission, which they claim until this encounter had prioritized Jews in the dissemination of the gospel and in the sharing of the blessings accompanying the inbreaking of God's kingdom. This was in keeping with the Jewish understanding of Israel's divinely ordained temporal precedence in the economy of salvation. So if you read the beginning of the letter to the Romans, Paul says to the Jew first and then the Gentile. In chapter two, he repeats that to the Jew first, then the Gentile. In chapter nine he talks about all the privileges of Israel. And then in chapter 11, he talks about the Jews as the tree and the Gentiles as the wild branches that are grafted on.

So clearly, there is, in the Jewish mind, precedence in the economy of salvation. So in her reply to Jesus, apparently, the woman challenges and transforms his understanding of his mission, teaching him to see that with the coming of God's kingdom, blessings are abundant and for all, now, even if in various measures. This insight is apparently what Jesus refers to when he says "because of this word" just before letting her know that her child was healed.

According to feminist interpreters, the Syrophenician mother is able to persuade Jesus to see her point by cleverly turning the metaphor against Jesus and in her favor. She concedes Jesus's point about the privileges of the children, about ethnic Israel. At the table, they get the food, and they can eat until they are satisfied.

But her agreement with Jesus stops there as she goes on to insist that dogs under the table-- now, unambiguously referring to domesticated dogs-- can enjoy some measure of the children's benefits at the same time that the children eat, even if it only amounts to crumbs that dropped from the table. So the idea is this: if she is willing to accept dog under the table second-class status, if she is willing to accept that children get better food and dogs don't get food at all but crumbs, and she's willing to accept that these crumbs now are sufficient to free her daughter of demons, then the argument goes Jesus has no reason, no justifiable reason, to withhold or even delay in giving her at least these little benefits for the sake of her and her daughter.

In this battle of the wits-- and this is how it's presented-- she is clearly the winner, which one scholar says is a point that any valid interpretation needs to acknowledge. She has shown that she, a woman, a non-Jew, a

pagan, has a more profound understanding than even Jesus of the universal implications of the inbreaking of God's kingdom. The word she speaks helps him to see that neither he nor his people lose anything if she and the Gentiles are given the crumbs, a share in God's blessing.

Now, as one author put it, her word, her *logos*, is more than an interesting and clever rejoinder. It is a word of salvation coming from another who is not Christ, from one who is his inferior in almost every way. As we have seen, for good reason, feminist interpreters reject the facile argument that Jesus was only joking to test the woman's faith and to understand the woman's reply as a catalyst for Jesus's changed understanding of his mission.

However, there is a recurring objection to such interpretations by those who note that in the narrative unfolding, as Mark tells the story of his gospel, Jesus had already initiated a mission to the Gentiles in chapter five when he crossed the lake, disembarked in the region of the Gerasenes in pagan territory, and relieved the man of all of the demons of which he was possessed. So Jesus did not need to be taught. He did not need to be prompted or persuaded to expand his mission to the Gentiles.

But others point out that Jesus's earlier outreach in Mark's gospel had been secretive until this encounter with the Syrophenician woman in whose *logos* Jesus hears himself challenged to conduct an open and transparent outreach to the Gentiles that demonstrates the now inclusive character of his mission. According to Pablo Alonso, this unrestricted public outreach begins immediately after Jesus's encounter with the Syrophenician woman. Why? Because he stays in pagan territory, he cures a deaf man, and then before-- before he does the very public feeding of 4,000 Gentiles, who now, like Israel, are gifted with food and are able to eat until they are filled.

And in chapter eight, verse eight, the Greek text uses the exact same verb that was used in the story of the Syrophenician woman to talk about the Jewish, or the Jews, or the children in terms of ethnic Israel being fed until they are filled. So that's the Gentiles. In any event, there is no denying that Jesus's mind was changed about the order and timing of the fulfillment of God's inbreaking rule and reign as it related to the inclusion of the Gentiles.

Even now, they can enjoy some share in the eschatological blessings, which have accompanied the arrival of the kingdom. Neither can one insist that all of Jesus's activity arose solely from his own initiative. So you have one or two scholars arguing-- and this is basically no woman could incite Jesus to change his mind or change his mission.

So one of the objections is that all of his initiatives arose from his own initiative. But besides the Syrophenician woman, other minor characters in this story-- if you think about the woman suffering from the flow of blood and even the story of the leper-- Jesus is a little testy about that leper coming near him. You know how Jews felt about lepers. But he has to overcome his resistance and cross some boundaries. And there were passages before the Syrophenician woman in this text where you see Jesus being nudged a little bit to move out of his comfort zone to embrace a wider mission.

Now, let's compare these profiles. Compared to the profile of Jesus emerging from the other interpretive approach we considered, here, we see, on the one hand, a more realistic and on the other, a more sympathetic view of Jesus. He is the product of his own religious tradition, and he has very entrenched views about the priority of Israel and the economy of salvation. The people of Israel and the Gentiles simply do not share elect status.

This was dogma in Jesus's day. And the episode portrays him sharing Israel's theology of election of particularism with all its cultural implications. He is reluctant to compromise on the issue, and so he is testy, not testing, testy and resistant when approached by this woman.

On the other hand, the episode-- or this interpretation, shows Jesus is not only open to dialogue with another, even a pagan woman, but willing to concede her point, even if it means that he has to change his own perspective. The woman emerges as quick-witted and resourceful, bold, intelligent, and persuasive. She is fiercely dedicated to her child's welfare. For her child, she risks condemnation for transgressing social norms to seek out Jesus and then finding him was willing to absorb his verbal abuse, but only to a point.

She is a woman who can enter into an argument, agree to a premise that it is not right to throw children's food out to the dogs, and then subtly subvert it by adding a premise of her own, which is equally irrefutable. Dogs do sit under tables, and they do eat crumbs. This is a woman who has been compared to an irrational animal, a dog, yet she speaks rationally, something only men were considered able to do, demonstrating great theological

insight.

She, who was described as a dog, has herself been instrumental in the healing and the liberation of her daughter from evil. In the flow of Mark's gospel, it is this woman, a poor marginalized pagan, who secures for non-Israelites a place, even if not yet an equal place, in the movement towards the fulfillment of Israel in the kingdom of God. On the positive side-- moving towards wrapping this up.

On the positive side, feminist interpretations of this text have raised up both the woman and Jesus as models for imitation, he for his openness to listen and move beyond his limited mission to Israel, she for her courage and resourcefulness. And as you might expect, feminist interpretations have gained tractions in many applied readings of this text where the stress is on inclusion, openness, and valuing the other. But feminist interpretations of this text, though, attractive-- and they are attractive-- have failed-- or glossed over, but failed to uncover and address what to many women and men, I think, are still problematic elements of this passage.

In the end, whether or not the Syrophenician woman is a change agent or Jesus is open-minded there remains the impression that it is right for some to have privileges and sit at the table while others get crumbs. There remains the impression that because it is divinely sanctioned, it is right for some to be raised to the status of children while others are considered less. There remains the impression that if you don't play the game to get what you want, maybe you won't be able to help your child. There remains the impression that demeaning and dehumanizing comments are OK as long as you can turn them to your own benefit and get what you want.

Moreover, structural inequality remains reflected in the division between those who are at the table and those who are under the table. At and under the table is a space metaphor that reflects power dynamics. Some have power, and some do not.

But this state of affairs is not OK, especially when we consider the obvious and extensive global inequalities, the division of our world into those with food and life sustaining resources and those without food and other basic necessities of life, those who live in well-watered and verdant lands and those who suffer from environmental degradation where, again, those in the global South suffer disproportionately disadvantage. By framing feminist interpretations of this passage in the context of Mark's theological concerns-- and most feminist interpretations do, I think, except for maybe one or two, interpreters have missed the opportunity to help the disenfranchised to read this text as one of liberation rather than one affirming the divine sanctioning of inequality and the disadvantages that go with that.

Feminist analyses are especially intended to critique the images of women portrayed in the text with an eye to empowering women and raising up models of imitation. But for many women, the empowerment ends in the commentary, in the world of the text, and has no impact on reality. In discussing this story with members of my community, with various women and women's groups, it became evident that for many, their lived experience resonates more with the less flattering interpretation of this story, where Jesus comes out of a world of institutional and conceptual structures, patriarchy and Jewish particularism that makes it possible to degrade a woman who is made to recognize that by divine mandate, one group is privileged and one is not and that she is among the not privileged. She must accept her subordinate status and eat crumbs.

One woman commented, "in thinking about this text, it occurred to me that this woman was doing what many women do. They beg for what is their due, and they beg for their children. Women who often put themselves in situations no matter how demeaning to advocate for others. I see this in the Church. Women are the ones who truly know their parishioners and advocate for them, often begging the pastors to respond or asking if they can have the wherewithal to answer the needs of those in their care.

My experience," she said, "working in parishes certainly could attest to this. In the Church ministries, women are often powerless and must beg and plead to be able to carry out the ministry to which they are called. Many are so used to, quote, "the way things are" that it has become the norm to always feel dependent on the pastor." Another commented, "others, but especially women, would likely see this passage as depicting their own position in the Church, begging to be recognized, allowed to use their gifts, and to be given decision-making power." She added, "to me, it's also a challenge to look at the still present mentality in our Church of exclusivity who is in, who is out, in multiple ways, religion, gender, sexual orientation, race, and so on."

These, and other women and men with similar experiences, do not uncritically accept subordination. Even for people who are empowered and emboldened by the example of the Syrophenician women to speak up, to speak out, many will say that they find themselves not before a persuadable Jesus open to conversation, but before intransigent Church leaders and pastors. They can reason, yes, and they can speak practically with wisdom and with theological acumen.

But unlike the Syrophenician woman, they do not have agency, they do not have power to affect change. In the power dynamic reflected in the spatial at/under language, they remain without power, the under group, the underrepresented, the underserved, the under the table, and so on. And to the voices of these women can be added the voices of people of color and queer Catholics.

I could give you so many examples. Just this week, I read a wonderful article by a Black Catholic woman who attended the Candler School of Theology, the Black Studies Program. I read this thing called the Black Catholic Messenger every day. And she talked about being invisible there and how Catholic history is presented as a completely whitewashed history.

There's so many things. Even writing this. I was thinking-- I grew up in an Italian-Irish white parish in Brooklyn. And when the Puerto Ricans started moving into our neighborhood, which was a horrible thing. I remember-- I was thinking about this under at thing. Why do minorities always have mass in the lower church and in the school basement? So you see this power dynamic that I'm talking about right here, this at/under.

So the implications, friends-- don't get me wrong. The implications that feminists extract from this story, Jesus's willingness to change his mind and hear God's voice in others, the possibility that through her intelligence and her theological insight, a woman can have agency and be the instrument of change, they're all good, and they are all intended to enkindle hope in what is possible for all who are marginalized. But if after 40 years of feminist interpretation, many women and others find themselves still on the margins and still find that the reality outside the interpreted text does not match the lived reality, the lived reality, perhaps, feminist theologians and biblical scholars need to explore what role, if any, the critique of texts has or should have beyond providing alternate readings that question the ultimacy and the legitimacy of other readings.

Now, while we're waiting for that to happen, and I imagine it will take another 20 years, we are beginning to see hopeful signs in the Church. The synod itself is a recognition that the Church needs to be a listening and not simply a teaching church and that the voices which needs to be heard are those of all the faithful, including those who experience rejection, exclusion, and unwelcome in church spaces and various church contexts. Though obstructed and criticized, Pope Francis is making strides, is making strides, to model the church after Jesus, the student, not just the teacher, the Jesus willing to give up some conservative views, which limited the scope of his ministry, so that he could bring the life-saving message of the gospel to the margins to all, a Jesus willing to listen to a woman reason and learn from a woman, to hear in her speech a prophetic word.

In an historic move, which took place just 10 days ago and caused me to have to go back and revise this paper just 10 days ago, Francis appointed three women to the Vatican's dicastery, the congregation for bishops--
[APPLAUSE]

--fulfilling a pledge he made earlier this month to grant women a voice and a seat on, really, one of the most consequential Vatican departments responsible for overseeing the selection of new bishops all over the world. And we know how important that is. The appointment of these three women, two nuns and a lay woman, is only the latest in a series of appointments over the last few years that have placed women in significant administrative roles throughout the Vatican.

Could the patriarchal clerical church actually be changing? And I am humbled and honored to say that the woman who voiced that question is here in the room today. Sister Nathalie Becquart--
[APPLAUSE]

--who, as you know, is the undersecretary for the Bishop's Committee on the Synod. So we are honored to have you here, Sister, and applaud what you do. So are we beginning to see real changes, or is this a cosmetic gesture? Look, there is no shortage of cynics questioning whether these three women will have any impact upon

the working of this congregation. After all, the pope did refer to the several women theologians he appointed to the theological commission as strawberries on the cake, nothing as bad as dogs, but nonetheless, a very cringe worthy remark.

Yet despite the Holy Father's faux pas, there seems to be no reason to doubt that Francis, who has been advocating for more meaningful and essential roles for women in the administration of the church, is just appointing them as decorations. I don't think he is. These are intelligent women. And the assets that they will bring to the table are well known and public.

But as one of the recent appointees, the lay woman, Maria Zervino noted in a recent interview for America magazine, there is still a long way to go before women's voices are satisfactorily integrated into the central leadership of the church. And she points out mere numbers alone as well as titles do not indicate how much power women have since many roles and their accompanying powers go with the clerical state. She's right, but they cannot be integrated at all unless they are seen and unless they are heard. And the seat at the table is already a challenge to the power dynamics at work in our church.

This is not the end of the struggle for seats at the table, but we are witnesses to an historic beginning. Some have already decided it's too little, too late, and they would prefer to set their own table elsewhere. But perhaps, now is the time for us to stay with it.

If there are cracks in the wall and if there is a chance for transformation, now is the time to gather strength from a shared struggle and push forward. Now is the time to be incubators of new ideas and practices that will dismantle patriarchy. Now, friends, is not the time to lose hope.

As I said to somebody the other day using a football metaphor, I feel like we're at first and goal. We're getting there. This is not the time when you're going to run back 30 yards and see where should I throw the ball? No, the whole front line has to stick together and push into the end zone.

This is not the time, not the time, to lose hope. To quote Francis himself, "hope opens new horizons, making us capable of dreaming what is not even imaginable." And friends, some of what was unimaginable even 10 years ago is already our reality.

We need to keep dreaming and working to bring the rest along. If the table that now exists is too small, the answer is not fewer seats or empty seats. It is, as they say, a bigger table worthy of the gospel of inclusion for which Jesus lived, and died, and rose again from the dead. Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]

Thank you. Thank you. I was supposed to ask a question. And you're going to have five or seven minutes to bat this question around. And the question that I have for you is this.

When you listen to these interpretations-- because this is really what I started with. Which interpreted woman do you really identify with, which interpreted women? A lot of women are inclined to interpret with that woman who is out there changing Jesus's mind, and a lot of women are still identifying with that woman subordinate. So just take five or seven minutes to talk to each other. And if you're a man, you're allowed to talk too.

[LAUGHTER]

Audience member:

First, I want to thank you for something I never saw with the word, logos, because in the beginning of creation, God spoke, and the word became flesh. And now this woman is clever enough to use the word. But I'd like to ask you probably a question. When is the episcopacy and the hierarchy going to read the epistles of Paul about women?

Sr. Pascuzzi:

Well, it depends which part of the epistle--

Audience member:

All of the houses that women headed, all of the missions they went out and did.

Sr. Pascuzzi:

OK, but you know how selective reading goes. In 1 Corinthians 14, women should be quiet and not speak. And they should go home. So yes, there's much in Paul, which is really the field that I usually work in, not Mark. There's much in Paul that is very much alive with the skills, and the talents, and the work of women in earliest Christianity.

So it's not that they don't read Scripture. You know how Jesus says that he who has ears, hear? It's what you hear. Pope Francis talks about the apostolate of ears, of hearing.

And I think it depends what you want to hear. Do you want to hear the story of Magdalene as the story we finally are hearing it as, as the first apostle to the apostles, or do you want to hear her story as the story of the whore? Can you imagine listening to a story for all those centuries without listening to the story? And people do that.

So I don't think it's a matter of when are they going to read Paul. It's a matter of how are they going to read Paul? How? Are they going to read Paul as the friend of women and someone that can model what it means to have collaborative ministerial partnerships with women of equals or not? And you can only do so much.

That was my point. Interpretation only does so much. It's interpretation. It's more words. And it depends on what you're willing to listen to. Anybody else, comment or question? Yes?

Audience member:

So first, thank you so much. It was just delightful. I was just sharing at the table-- I heard a quote from Shanann Watts the other day who founded Moms Demand Action for gun safety. And she said, she's encouraging women to run for office. And she said, if you're not at the table, you'll be on the menu. And so I just wanted to throw that in.

But what I'm asking is to key off of your last statement about interpretation can just go so far. So for example, by 1969, the Vatican accepted the real Mary Magdalene story, but they never announced it. It was in a footnote. It was in a footnote.

And it just said, from now, on this feast is just of Mary Magdalene. Well, [INAUDIBLE]. So anyhow, what has to happen is art, lectures, celebrations, children's plays. And those are some ideas. But I would love, like the Spirit Alive. I'd like you to maybe speak a little bit more about that. Or what avenues, what vehicles do you see for us, as absorbers of interpretation, to help move that from the academic areas and the analytic texts out into the practical, into the catechetical world, into the world of celebration, liturgy, and—

Sr. Pascuzzi:

One of the women that I was talking to when I was having conversations about this, she said, we need a me too- a #MeToo movement in the church, something that really is going to rock the foundations. I don't know about that. But let me put it this way to go back to your point.

So I taught in colleges and universities in seminaries for a long time. And when you teach 18, 19, 20-year-olds, they sit there like, why do I have to take this Bible course? It's so boring. It's like mind-numbing.

So when I finally got out from that, I thought, think of all of the people who didn't have the opportunity to have the education that these young people could have, but didn't have it. So I approached the then general superior of my order, and I said, I want to start a program. And I picked Spirit Alive because at the end of Luke's

gospel and at the end of this gospel, why do you seek the living among the dead?

For a lot of people, the church is dead. For a lot of young people, the church is the most boring dead place. Every other Sunday, I think the same thing. But it's the way it is.

So you have to think of ways. If that's not going to be the way to do it, then you have to bring another way to do this. And I'll let you in on this: My dream is to become the anti-Mother Angelica.

[LAUGHTER]

I want Spirit Alive and programs like it-- which I think is your program-- I want us to have a voice in educating people about what possibilities there are in scripture, in theology, in art, in all of the things that you mentioned. We have an enormous patrimony, matrimony, whatever you want to call it, of wonderful life-giving things that have allowed the world to flourish because of Catholic tradition and because of a vision that is there in the eyes and the mind of our founders and people like you who want to live it. So I just think we need to continue educating.

And I hate to say it, but everybody in this room, except the people who dye their hair, is old. Right? They are. You are. Look at the average age in this room. Where are the young people? I mean, Ms. Houlihan, I think one of the most important things we need to do is somehow reattach youth to our church.

Somebody was talking to me during the break. When I was teaching at the University of San Diego, kids would say to me, why are you still in the church? You can't preach. You can't do this. You have a doctorate in scripture, blah, blah. OK.

Then why are you still a nun? It's like being in an abusive marriage. See what the church does? Somehow, we have to create the condition for the possibility of seeing the church.

The church is like a tapestry. Underneath every tapestry, there are knots, and pulls, and its ugliness. But on the top, there's something really beautiful.

And I think we can't deny that the church is like a tapestry. It has its pulls underneath. It has the knots. It has all the things that go together. And when you look at that side, you can't imagine that on the other side of the tapestry, there's something incredibly beautiful.

So we have the knots, and we have the problems. But all of us who have lived in the church and loved the church know that there's another side. I don't know how we can make that other side more forcefully present in the lives of people today.

But I am 71 years old. And I hope to live to be 100. And I am going to keep doing this until I die because I think-- if we don't-- my brother called me the other day. He said-- it was my birthday.

He said it's too bad you can't be retired like a normal person, Maria, and just to do nothing. And I said, I don't want to retire and be like a normal person. This is a passion.

We have to have counter-Mother Angelica, a counter approach to the church. We have to be the inclusive, welcoming church. And we have to bring what is right and good about the church to other people.

I don't I don't know how we're going to do it, but my program, Spirit Alive, is a very small thing. You will see if you want. Starting in October, I am running a yearlong anniversary webinar series for the 60th anniversary of Vatican II. Cardinal Cupich is going to introduce it. Cardinal McElroy is going to conclude it. I hope the Holy Father, if he answers my mail, will pre-record something for us to bless it. And in the middle, we have wonderful faculty, including John Baldovin from this place.

The bishops are doing nothing, as far as I know, to celebrate the 60th anniversary of Vatican II. We are doing it. And if they won't do it, we do it. So we just need time, and a little bit of money, and energy, and creativity to get it done. But that's what I do for a living.

[APPLAUSE]

Audience member:

You mentioned the need for education. And I think one of the few instances that the Catholic population

has to become educated is at the liturgy, the little bit of scripture that they hear, maybe every Sunday or whenever they're there. And do you hear anything at all about a revision of the lectionary?

I mean, a couple of weeks ago we got Jezebel. I mean, there's a great big Bible there, and the church gives us Jezebel to listen to. It just perpetuates the oppression of women.

Sr. Pascuzzi:

Not Phoebe, the deacon. I was on the committee appointed by the USCCB to do the revised letters of Paul for the new lectionary. And I worked with five people. It was a very interesting group of people.

And we sent our revised text up the pipeline. And I haven't heard positive things about what the people at the top of the pipeline did with what we did. So I don't know. That's supposed to be the basis of the new lectionary.

If you read Saint Paul, he's like a German. He has long Greek sentences that are lines eight long. And so we tried to break it down and make it readable for lectors and understandable for people. But I understand that there are people in the committee a step above me that like Greek kai.

Kai means 'and.' And Jesus did this, and Jesus did that, and Jesus did this. And so we're going to get a lot of kai, kai, kai in the lectionary.

But I don't know. It's out of my hands right now. I did my part. And that's it. I've kept the translations that we did in committee, and I use them when I'm called on to do something. So anybody else?

[INAUDIBLE]

I don't know because it has to go through the American Bishops, then it has to go to Rome, then it comes back. It'll be a while. You'll still be here, but don't hold your breath. Yes, sir.

Audience member:

Hello. Thank you so much for this. It's been amazing. I have two questions. Number one, to what extent does this account go back to the Jesus of history? What's the evidence on both sides of that?

And two, depending on your answer to that, what is this narrative doing in the arc of Mark's gospel? If it doesn't go back to the history of historical Jesus, why would someone include it? What is it functioning doing there?

Sr. Pascuzzi:

The of answer to the first question, what about the historicity of the passage is yes, there are people who believe that it was an actual event in the life of Jesus. And if not the exact setting, certainly-- some people say because in both Mark and Matthew's gospel, the almost verbatim exchange between Jesus and the woman is there, that it surely is probably something that happened.

And one scholar said, why would you make up a story like that, which actually shows Jesus to be losing his point of view, be losing an argument? John Meier in volume two of Jesus-- A Marginal Jew-- I think he's there-- he's joined by a number of other scholars who say that this was not an historical event in the life of Jesus, but that this was a post-Jesus, post-resurrection creation of the early church during a very fraught time when the early church was struggling with the integration of Gentiles into what had been initially a completely Jewish messianic movement.

And so the jury is out. I think you can read-- as many people who think that this is an actual event in the life of Jesus as those who say it was probably a Christian creation that reflects that tension and that in presenting Jesus as someone who seems to have, because of doing the miracle, extended the eschatological blessings to this Gentile pagan woman, that is supposed to be a model for people living in 70 or 75, or whenever Mark is writing, 69, to say to those people, see, this is what Jesus did, so that the movement to the pagans really began almost-- it's kind of like retro reading into the time of Jesus, this outreach or to the Gentiles. So the second question-- just repeat that again.

Audience member:

What do you think it's doing, why would Mark include it, and how is it functioning in the overall narrative of Mark?

Sr. Pascuzzi:

Well, as I said in the presentation, if he's using it apologetically-- because he is talking to people in his own audience. So here's Jesus. He lives in 30, or 31, or 32, or whenever he dies. Here's is Mark writing for his audience.

The situation in the life of his audience is different than the situation in the life of Jesus. And he has questions that he has to answer, and so he creates-- as all the gospel writers do, they use the tradition, and they shape the tradition with an eye to understanding the situation in the life of the churches to whom they are writing.

And so the idea is that Mark inserts this passage in there because he's talking to people living post-Jesus by 30 or 40 years who are still struggling with allowing Gentiles to come in. This is how I like to think about it. Think about in the United States, we've had the Emancipation Proclamation since 1863, and then it took 10 more years, I guess it was, for Juneteenth and so on.

OK, look at how many years centuries have passed, and we still have problems of inculturation in the United States. We still have problems with people of color. We still have problems with immigrants who are coming in. We still have problems.

So now you're talking about a gospel that was written only 30 or 40 years after Jesus. And this is after a history of millennia, of deriding, denouncing, derogatory, shameful depreciation of anyone who was not a Jew. Now, that's a little bit exaggerated because you also have in the books of the prophets the whole idea that eventually, everyone that salvation would come out of Zion and that eventually, the Gentiles would be let in.

But it's one thing-- and I think this is true-- it's one thing to read-- if you're a Jew living in 70, it's one thing to go back and have somebody say, hey, don't be so prejudiced because it says in the book of Isaiah that they were going to come in. But then it's another thing that they're going to come in and sit next to you. And this is what happens all the time.

So you can go back and read that we should be good. But are they going to sit next to you? And that is really the issue. And that's what he's dealing with.

So hopefully, I've answered your question. But if you go back and-- I think it was a post Jesus probably creation of the early church answering that question about do we let Gentiles in here. That was really touchy. They were like smelly disgusting people. They're dogs.

I mean, you have to think about it literally how you feel about that. And that's the way they felt. I come from a neighborhood in Brooklyn. I grew up between two of the largest Hasidic communities outside of Israel, Williamsburg, Brooklyn and Borough Park Brooklyn.

And-- not I, but sisters in my community, we had a school in one of those neighborhoods. They spit on the sisters who in the old days wearing the full old habit. We were dirty Gentiles. That's what we were.

And we're talking about a millennia after the fact. I mean, prejudices are hard to die and hard to relieve ourselves of. And even when we think we don't have them, as soon as that person is there next to us, then we understand that we do.

Online audience member:

All right. Thank you very much. So this question asks, if you see any parallels between this narrative about the Syrophoenician woman's interactions with Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well's interactions both engaging in rational highly theological discussions, the Samaritan woman episode is also understood as a post-resurrection interpretation as an expansion of Christianity to non-Jews.

Sr. Pascuzzi:

Yeah. I mean, to me, the obvious distinction is that one was called a dog, and one was not. So one begins at this level of real negative animus towards this person who's intruded on this space. In the other passage, it's Jesus who's passing through the Samaritan territory. So she's not encroaching on his space. He's kind of encroaching on her space.

And so, yeah, I think that you have just a different ethos in both of those passages in different contexts, different-- in the end, she goes out, and she brings the message to her neighbors that she has found the Messiah, the Christ. Nothing like that happens in the story of the Syrophenician woman. She leaves. She's dismissed. Go. Your child is healed.

So there's no becoming a spokeswoman for the Messiah and saying that you found him because he told me everything that I knew. It's a markedly different passage. In some ways, what is common to both is that there's a reach out beyond Jews to Gentiles. But after that, I think they're markedly and significantly different. So we have time for one last question if there's an ask-- right there

Audience member:

Hi. Thank you so much for this lovely talk. And as one of the younger people in the audience and a mother of three boys, I just wanted to speak to what you were talking about of being at first and goal, that I certainly have friends, peers who are leaving the Catholic church, and yet I love the Catholic Church, and I'm raising my sons in that love as well, even though they find church incredibly boring as well. But when I sit and-- I'm a graduate also of the STM and read scripture with them, and open it up for them-- and I fully intend to open up this scripture passage with them-- it is alive.

And it's human. And it's true to the ways that we get tied up and the way we find ourselves-- the way we get out of our messy situations. And so, both, I feel this hope of, yes, identifying as a woman who feels like she's begging to help our children, to help our parish. So I appreciate so much that call to, what are we going to do about it, that we can't stay with the status quo? We actually have to overcome and not accept the impression that this different levels of status in the church is OK.

But also to your point of status of old and young is that I look around this room, and I think about my friends who have left in their 30s the church. And I say, you haven't left. And that is an incredible witness to me, that you haven't left. And that probably means I'm not going to leave. And not to discount everyone's role here of teaching and putting into action of your faith because Pope Francis, who's making these changes that we thought would never happen, or still needs to continue to happen, is old. John XXIII, it was the dream of an old man that changed the entire course of our lives. And there's something that I think you can only gain through the wisdom of years.

You didn't work all your life for your years to not count anymore. You work so you can cash it in to have an effect on people like me, on my children. So just want to lift up your faith as inspiring to me. And please keep living it out. Thank you.

Sr. Pascuzzi:

Wonderful. So to everyone with gray hair, a toast to you and your faith. Keep it up, and thank you so much.