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Seán O'Sullivan

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Voice (1):
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Woman as an icon
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This year the Sunday Lectionary invites us to reflect of what Mark the evangelist describes as the ‘Good News about Jesus Christ’ (Mark 1:1). But the Church, for reasons known only to itself, denies us the opportunity to view this portrait in all of its power and splendor by omitting two keys passages from our Sunday worship. The healing of the Gerasene demoniac in Mark 5:1-20, and indeed the parallel texts in Matthew 8:28-34 and Luke 8:26-39, are omitted entirely from the three-year Sunday cycle. The encounter between Jesus and an unnamed Syrophoenician woman, recorded in Mark 7:24-31, is also omitted this year though the parallel, but very distinct, account of Jesus and a Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:21-28 is proclaimed on the 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time in Year A.

I readily admit that both encounters present serious challenges and difficulties for both preachers and congregations, as indeed they do for biblical scholars and commentators, and yet by excluding them from our Sunday worship, we effectively silence an important and, I would suggest, an essential element of the witness that Mark’s gospel has to offer us as believers. The simple fact is that if a gospel text is not proclaimed when we gather as a community to pray together then it is likely that the vast majority of believers will never have the opportunity to hear its saving word or to reflect on its significance. It is worth noting that both passages are included in the Revised Common Lectionary used by Protestant Churches and here, as elsewhere, we would be well served by following their example. One can only wonder whether those responsible for compiling our Sunday Lectionary were trying to save preachers or congregations or perhaps, the Church itself, from the awkward

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and unsettling questions that these passages pose. Whatever their reasons, we are, I contend, all the poorer for not being afforded the opportunity to wrestle with the polemic of these passages in the hope of gleaning from them a saving word or a blessing, as Jacob did when he dared to wrestle with God in Genesis 32:22-32.

My focus in this article is on exploring the meaning and the significance, both for individual believers and for the Church, of the encounter between Jesus and the Syrophenician woman in Mark 7:24-31 and on restoring the powerful and saving word of this remarkable woman who quite correctly refuses to be silenced.

A POLEMICAL AND CONTROVERSIAL PASSAGE

Mark's account of the encounter between Jesus and an unnamed Syrophenician woman has fascinated and frustrated believers and scholars, almost in equal measure, throughout history. We are fascinated by its jarring portrayal of Jesus' apparent reluctance to heal a young child; we are frustrated by the difficulty of reconciling such a portrait with the image of Jesus consistently presented elsewhere throughout the gospels. All too often scholars and preachers have sought to 'airbrush' out the more jarring and anomalous elements in this passage instead of allowing the text to speak its own powerful message on its own terms.

The New Revised Standard Version translates the passage as follows:

From there he [Jesus] 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, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go-- the demon has left your daughter." So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone. Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. [NRSV]

If we accept the scholarly consensus that Mark's gospel is the earliest of the four canonical gospels, then Matthew's reframing of the tradition in Matthew 15:21-29, which is a considerably

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tamer account of an encounter between Jesus and a Canaanite woman, suggests that Mark's account posed as many questions and difficulties for the early Christian community as it does for modern readers. Matthew presents a 'softer' and more sympathetic portrayal of the tradition: the encounter takes place in a more public setting and the woman addresses Jesus as 'Son of David' – a title laden with messianic significance. In Matthew's account, Jesus explains the rationale of his refusal by stating that 'he was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel' and, perhaps most tellingly, Jesus explicitly acknowledges the woman's 'faith' as his inspiration for healing her daughter.

Whilst establishing the historicity of any gospel encounter is a complex and contested issue, some biblical scholars suggest that there are good reasons for believing that Mark's account reflects the powerful memory of an encounter within Jesus' own ministry. Given the tensions that we know existed concerning table-fellowship between Jewish-Christians and Gentile-Christians in the early Church, it is hard to imagine why the evangelist would otherwise attribute to Jesus a position that his own community had almost certainly rejected by the time the gospel came to be written. The story of the Syrophenician woman, as it has come down to us, could have been not simply embarrassing to the early Christian community but it could have been detrimental to the unity of the evangelist's own mixed community. The very fact that he did not adjust the story accordingly but left the inherent difficulties unresolved argues strongly for the passage having some historical basis. Such a polemical encounter would have remained a powerful, if somewhat perplexing, memory in the early Jesus community. Moreover, biblical scholars highlight that several aspects of the grammar in the passage, especially the woman's response, reflect Semitic rather than Greek grammar and may therefore constitute further evidence of the antiquity of the tradition.

STRUCTURE – A GUIDE TO MEANING

The immediate context of the narrative of this passage within the wider gospel narrative is that of Jesus' ongoing controversy with the Pharisees over purity boundaries in Mark 7:1-23. Coming immediately after the declaration that all foods are clean, Jesus goes to a Gentile territory and so the theme of boundaries is continued. The encounter with the Syrophenician woman also notably stands between accounts of the feeding of a multitude in Jewish territory (Mark 6:30-44) and the subsequent feeding of a multitude in a gentile region (Mark 8:1-10).

Biblical scholars draw our attention to the fact that the passage

is carefully constructed as a concentric chiasm that can be represented as follows:

- a. Jesus' arrival near Tyre and his desire to be alone (24)
- b. The woman approaches (25)
(Parenthetical note on the woman's ethnicity [26a])
- c. The woman's petition. (26b)
 - d. Jesus' response (27)
 - e. The woman's retort (28)
- d'. Jesus' second response (29a)
- c'. The woman's petition is granted (29b)
- b'. The woman returns home and finds her daughter healed (30)
- a'. Jesus returns from the region of Tyre (31a)

Such a structure typically serves to draw our attention to the central element of the chiasm. In this case the woman's response acts as the focal point and the hinge of the encounter. The very structure of the passage should cause us to suspect that the woman's response, the only words directly attributed to her in the passage, will be critical to any understanding of the episode: a suspicion that is strengthened by Jesus' explicitly drawing attention to her word or '*logos*'.

AN ENCOUNTER OVERSHADOWED BY DIFFERENCE

The passage begins with Jesus entering a house and wishing to remain unnoticed. The text gives no details as to whose house it is and the reference is best understood in terms of Mark's characteristic use of "house" as a place of teaching and revelation (1:29; 2:1; 3:20; 5:38; 7:17; 9:33) – a clue perhaps that what follows is a form of teaching. The woman is initially introduced in terms of her need: she is the mother of a child with an unclean spirit. It is this initial description that shapes our emotional response as readers to the entire episode. We immediately empathize with the desperation of any parent seeking to save the life of a sick child. The immediacy of her coming to Jesus upon hearing of his presence in the region captures both the urgency and desperation of her situation. Here, it is the woman, not Jesus, who takes the initiative.

The evangelist deliberately goes to great lengths to identify the woman in both cultural and religious terms, even though this means distorting the carefully constructed chiasmic structure of the episode. She is a Gentile of Syrophenician origin. From the perspective of the text, as "woman," as "pagan" and as "foreigner" she is in every way possible different to Jesus. Her actions in approaching Jesus exactly mirror the actions of Jairus pleading for his daughter

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in Mark 5:21-43. His plea had been answered, thereby creating a heightened sense of anticipation. Both come, both bow down at the feet of Jesus and both plead for a sick daughter, traditionally one of the most vulnerable members in ancient mid-Eastern society.

THE SCANDAL OF JESUS' RESPONSE

Jesus' response is as shocking as it is unexpected. Whereas he had healed Jairus' daughter and notably instructed her parents to give her something to eat, here he not only refuses the woman's plea to heal her daughter but he argues that her daughter should not receive the 'children's food.' It is not simply the fact of his refusal that is shocking but the derogatory and uncaring manner, laden with racist undertones, in which it is expressed. Whilst in Mark's gospel Jesus does not explain the rationale of his refusal, as will occur in Matthew's account of the Canaanite woman, it is clearly based on a differentiation between the care due to 'children' and to 'dogs.' In the Hebrew Scriptures the image of "children" is frequently used as an image for or reference to the people of Israel (Exod 4:22; Deut 14:1; Hosea 11:1; etc.) while the metaphor of "dogs" occurs in several biblical texts as a term of abuse for Gentiles (1Sam 17:43; 2 Kgs 8:13). Bread is regarded as a synonym for life in many cultures and in this instance is best understood as such. While the use of the term 'first' leaves open the possibility that there may come a time when others are fed, the simple fact is that, in this instance, the woman cannot wait: her daughter needs help and she needs it now!

FACING UP TO THE SCANDAL OF JESUS' RESPONSE

Few, if any, words of Jesus in the gospels have generated such polemic which perhaps explains the Church's resistance to having it included in our Sunday Lectionary. In earlier passages Jesus is described as being 'moved with compassion' to cure a leper (Mark 1:41) and to feed a multitude (Mark 6:34). How then could this 'man of compassion' now be so cruel and uncaring as to refuse to heal a sick child? How could he be so obviously prejudiced in his world-view and how could we not have known before now? This passage after all occurs almost at the halfway point of the gospel narrative!

The history of exegesis and devotion have not been found wanting in their zeal to "soften" and diminish the scandal of Jesus' response and to absolve Jesus of wrongdoing or, at the very least, to mitigate his responsibility. Some have interpreted Jesus' refusal in biographical terms insisting that his response is a reaction to being

interrupted when he wanted to be left alone. Yet such an explanation doesn't account for other examples of Jesus' reaction to similar situations in Mark 1:37 and Mark 6:30-44. Other apologists link his harsh refusal to Jesus' earlier rejection by a Gentile community in Mark 5:1-20 and his own advice to his disciples concerning the treatment of those who did not welcome them in Mark 6:11. Yet this explanation raises the equally problematic notion that the Syrophoenician woman is being made to pay for the rejection of others. Moreover, despite the many controversies that occur in the gospel between Jesus and Jewish authorities he continues to engage with them and answers a plea for 'a little one' in Mark 5:21-43. The undeniable fact is that Jesus' response to the woman offers a "striking contrast with every other healing situation in the Gospel. Only here does the initial request meet with refusal."¹

Other scholars maintain that Jesus was merely testing the faith of the woman. Yet there is nothing in the text to justify such an inference. Matthew will introduce the idea of faith in his account but Mark makes no such claim. Some scholars have sought to breach the impasse on linguistic grounds stressing that Mark uses the diminutive term "puppies" in place of the more generic term meaning "dogs" claiming that such a choice has the effect of softening Jesus' comment from direct insult to condescension. Our moral indignation however to a sick child being compared to a dog is in no way assuaged by the use of the term "puppy" particularly given that dogs in general, be they puppies or fully grown, were regarded as scavengers and ritually unclean within Judaism. Another attempt to defuse the scandal comes from a historical critical interpretation of the gospel and attributes the tensions portrayed in the episode as reflecting tensions regarding table fellowship in the early Christian community. While this is undoubtedly a concern for the evangelist in his gospel, it does not explain why he presents the episode in this fashion. As I have already noted, this passage, as it has come down to us, could have been detrimental to Mark's own purposes given the tensions in his own community. The very fact that he did not adjust the passage accordingly suggests that the evangelist deliberately incorporated this encounter because he believed that it had something significant to reveal to us, something that justified the controversy it might well cause within his own community.

Finally, some scholars propose that the harshness of Jesus' comments should be understood in the context of the abusive relationship between the city dwellers of Tyre and the Jewish

1 Sharyn Dowd, *Reading Mark: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Second Gospel* (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 2000), 76.

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peasants of the surrounding countryside.² Whilst such a tension may indeed have manifest itself historically in a hostility towards the people of Tyre, surely a similar hostility would have been felt towards tax collectors as agents of a foreign power and nonetheless Jesus eats with them and even calls Levi to be his disciple (Mark 2:14). It should also be noted that the gospel parables that deal with day laborers, debt, resentment towards absentee landlords and exploitative stewards, which might be regarded as reflecting such socio-economic tensions, are completely absent in Mark's Gospel. The simple fact is that the woman comes to Jesus in the poverty of her powerlessness pleading with him to save her sick daughter. Jesus' refusal has to be seen for what it is: clear evidence of a prejudice that refuses to accede to her plea because of who she is in racial and ethnic terms; she is a 'dog' and not a 'child'; an 'outsider' and not 'a child of the covenant.' Ultimately we must accept and seek to understand the harshness of Jesus' response rather than simply seeking to airbrush it away.

THE SYROPHOENICIAN WOMAN'S REFUSAL TO BE EXCLUDED

It would be perfectly natural for the woman to be devastated by Jesus' refusal and to be outraged by the manner of his response. It would be understandable if she were to respond by cursing him and walking away. Yet, incredibly, she does neither. Despite the hurt and the outrage she must feel, she refuses to accept that the conversation is over and that no more can be said on the matter. She refuses to be silenced and she refuses to give up on her hope of securing a saving word for her daughter and even retains a respectful tone addressing Jesus as 'Sir' as she seeks to continue the conversation.

Tellingly, she does not directly oppose what Jesus has said but rather responds in a way that, instead of contradicting what he has said, extends and reinterprets his response: "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs" (Mark 7:28). In other words, she takes the very same elements that Jesus has used in his stinging allegory and re-envisages them in a new way. Within her re-interpretation and reframing of the allegory, the "dogs" are now relocated inside the house. The introduction of the detail "under the table" transforms the allegory into a domestic and familial scene with all the associations of belonging implicit in such a setting. Whereas Jesus had spoken of bread being 'thrown' to the dogs, implying that the dogs were somewhere outside the house and therefore not part of the household, the woman speaks of the

2 Gerd Theissen, *The Gospels in Context: Social and Political History in the Synoptic Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 60-80.

crumbs falling from the table under which the dogs are sitting, inside the house and part of the wider household. We know from literary sources (Plutarch, *Aemilius Paulus* 10,4; Pliny, *Letters* 4,2.3), relief sculptures and vase paintings that the Greeks and Romans kept house dogs as domestic pets, unlike the Jews who regarded dogs as scavengers and ritually unclean.³

THE INSPIRATION OF THE WOMAN'S RESPONSE

But where, we might ask, did the woman acquire such insight and wisdom? Whilst the biblical text does not speak directly of the well-spring or source of the woman's wisdom, it does, I believe, hint at the inspiration of her response. The power invoked by the woman is not based on any right that she can claim. It is based simply on her daughter's desperate need and the capacity of Jesus to respond. The need of one and the ability of the other to respond to that need are the very elements that Jon Sobrino has identified as being the constitutive elements of mercy. Mercy, Sobrino insists, is "a reaction to the suffering on another ... whereby one reacts to eradicate that suffering for the sole reason that it exists."⁴ Thus the woman's response is above all else an appeal to mercy: Her appeal is to unbiased mercy – the type of mercy implicit in the falling crumbs. She insists, as Shakespeare would centuries later, that "the quality of mercy is not strained."⁵

Her intuitive awareness, powerfully expressed in her response, is that mercy recognizes no boundaries and is of its very nature sufficiently abundant for all to enjoy its benefits. Inspired by this conviction she challenges Jesus's refusal and invites him to discover within himself that which overcomes all boundaries and barriers that may divide us: namely, our shared humanity. Humanity is the household symbolized in her reconfigured metaphor. The power of mercy invoked by the woman is not based on rights attained through birth, culture or social norms; rather it is based upon the need experienced by "one" and the capacity of the "other" to respond to that need. "Her kind of faith; faith in unbiased, undeserved mercy – the faith of the powerless, not of the powerful – did not overshadow her ethnic and gender otherness but highlighted it."⁶

3 Sharyn Dowd, *Reading Mark: A Literary and Theological Commentary* on the Second Gospel, 77.

4 Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People down from the Cross* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1993), 18.

5 William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1998) 197.

6 Judith Gundry-Volf, "Spirit, Mercy and the Other," *Theology Today* 51 (1995) 520.

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The Syrophenician woman offers a different perspective, a different way of seeing and understanding the same elements, precisely because her experience in life has been different. She sees and interprets the same realities in a dramatically different fashion, because in her cultural world, her lived experience, they have a very different significance and resonance. The woman finds room for her daughter, not by challenging her designation as a “dog” but rather by reinterpreting the term from her own cultural context and in the process transfigures her daughter’s place in the allegory from that of an “outsider” to that of an “insider.” Her response in no way denies the differences that exist between Jesus and herself. From her cultural perspective, the ‘dogs’ may not be scavengers and may indeed be domestic pets, but they are still not truly members of the household in the way the children are. They are brought inside, yet they are *under* the table and not *at* the table. She accepts the reality of the differences that distinguish herself and her daughter from Jesus but her reconfiguring of the allegory creates a broader sense of shared belonging even if a dog belongs to the household in a way that is qualitatively different from that of ‘children.’ In her reconfigured image *both* ‘children’ and ‘dogs’ now are located within the house and belong to the household. In so doing she offers a radically different way of seeing and understanding the same reality. The distinctions between ‘dogs’ and ‘children,’ between Jew and Gentile, are not denied but both are now subsumed into the superordinate group that is the household of humanity.

Drawing on her own domestic experience in which household pets benefit from the children’s crumbs, the woman’s response in no way seeks to deprive the children of their food: she merely wishes to be allowed to benefit from other’s surplus. She makes no claim on the children’s bread. Her request is far more modest; she seeks only the crumbs that fall from the table. Her appeal therefore does not threaten the children’s right to their “bread” as Jesus’ response seems to infer but seeks only that her daughter be allowed to feed off their crumbs. The woman instinctively and intuitively believes that grace of its very nature is extravagantly abundant. Her insistence that her daughter receive these crumbs is the expression of a firm conviction that there is more than enough to go round for all, even for little dogs. In many ways her response proclaims the very mystery that the twelve baskets of scraps of food symbolized in Mark 6:43. The crumbs the dogs receive are no longer the result of a deliberate act of the house owner whom Jesus had portrayed as intentionally throwing the bread to the dogs but rather are the crumbs that fall naturally from the table and which are a natural and intrinsic part of the very act of a family gathering for a meal at table.

In many respects the woman's response echoes the deeply rooted conviction within the Hebrew Scriptures that a commitment to kinship solidarity should not, and must not, undermine the rights and privileges of those standing outside of any kin-relationship, be they stranger or foreigner (Exod 23:11; Lev 19:9-10; Deut 24:19). Her response therefore echoes one of the highest and most noble aspirations of the Jewish law: namely, that mercy and goodness must be shown to all. By finding room for her daughter in the reconfigured allegory, the woman rejects both the exclusivism and the sequential priority implied in Jesus' refusal.

ENLARGED THINKING AND 'A SAVING WORD FROM THE OUTSIDE'

Jesus is now faced with a dilemma: a Gentile woman makes her appeal based on the core value of God's mercy, and in so doing, she challenges Jesus to re-examine his own vision of his mission and ministry and to rediscover within himself and his own religious heritage the primacy of mercy. This is her contrasting truth: the unwavering conviction that mercy knows no bounds and must transcend all boundaries. In many ways the Syrophenician woman assumes the prophetic mantle of Abraham and Moses who are described as similarly debating with God for the sake of others, challenging God to move beyond the demands of justice in order to be truly merciful (Gen18:22-23; Deut 9:25-29).

Jesus is completely disarmed by the woman's reply. The one who has consistently led throughout the narrative and who has chastised his own disciples for their lack of understanding, here changes his mind and recognizes the woman's position as a saving word (*logos*). In fact the text bears witness that he explicitly attributes this change of heart to the woman's word. A more literal translation of his response reads 'Because of your word [*your logos*], you may go.' The woman's response, her contrasting truth, forces Jesus to recognise the contradictions within his vision and ultimately leads to a transformed vision. The illusion of the legitimacy of exclusion is shattered and in the following chapters in the gospel narrative we find Jesus healing a deaf man in the Decapolis region (Mark 7:31-37), feeding the four thousand in a gentile area (8:1-10), and including all nations in his vision of the elect (Mark 13:27) without reference to any boundary or distinction. The Syrophenician woman's vision, which stands at the center of the structural chiasm, stands as the defining wisdom of the story and is explicitly acknowledged as such by Jesus within the text. Here Jesus does not pronounce the miracle. He simply confirms that the little girl has been cured and explicitly attributes it to the *logos* or 'word' of the woman!

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Her *logos* is recognized as the saving or saving or ‘messianic’ word that ultimately saves both her daughter and Jesus. Her insistence that mercy knows no bias becomes the saving word that allows Jesus to understand his life and mission in a new and more inclusive way. Her *logos* is the sacred word of the story. Jesus, the one who consistently calls others to follow him, is presented here as responding to her initiative and understanding. It is surely significant that the woman’s response in verse 28 is the only part of the verbal interchange that occurs in the present tense, suggesting perhaps the ongoing and enduring significance of this *logos* beyond the limits of this particular passage. It is also worth noting how the power of her ‘logos’ contrasts with the inability of the disciples to cast out an unclean spirit in the only remaining instance of the healing of an unclean spirit in Mark 9:18.

The principle of mercy becomes the transforming power of the story, both for her daughter who is liberated of the unclean spirit and for Jesus who is liberated of the unclean spirit of exclusion. How far Jesus has moved from his original position is highlighted when, for the very first time, he refers to the little girl not as ‘little dog’ but as “daughter” at the end of the pericope in verse 30. She is now raised to equal status with the “little children” and within this new vision is the recipient of healing on an equal footing as the children of Israel. To put it in figurative terms, it is as though Jesus has allowed ethnic and religious considerations to blinker his vision and blind him to the desperate plight of the woman. Initially he sees only “a Gentile of Syrophoenician origin” (Mark 7:26). The woman’s response forces Jesus to become aware of these “blinkers,” to recognize how they have restricted his vision, urges him to cast them aside and ultimately begs him to recognize her for who she truly is “*a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit*” (Mark 7:25) which is precisely how the evangelist introduced her at the beginning of the pericope.

Biblical scholars continue to debate whether the historical Jesus actually pursued an active ministry to Gentiles or not. What is clear is that, subsequent to the encounter with the Syrophoenician woman, Jesus is clearly presented in Mark’s Gospel as engaging in a healing ministry, a miraculous feeding and, at least implicitly, a teaching ministry to the gentile crowds. All the constitutive elements of a mission to the gentiles are present: they are not simply prefigured; they are realized although their full realization may yet lie in the future. The fact that the evangelist does not record more details of this ministry can be accounted for by the fact that having established Jesus’ mission to the gentiles in paradigmatic form, the evangelist’s attention shifts in Mark 9:31 and the focus switches to the journey to Jerusalem and the cross.

Despite the existence of a Justa and Berenice tradition in the early church, according to which the Syrophoenician woman and her daughter became followers of Jesus, the gospel text offers no basis for believing that the woman converted: the text simply tells us she went home. The boundaries of difference are overcome but diversity is respected. Change is neither demanded nor expected: rather a space is created where change can take place and new ways of thinking and being can emerge. As such the passage rejects the pretension of a forced homogeneity. Instead, it promotes and respects the particularity of each voice and is enriched rather than threatened by such diversity. In short it respects the dignity of *difference*.

Hospitality. Hospitality, offering a seat at mealtime to strangers, had long been recognized as fundamental benefaction (Gen. 18:5; 19:3; Exod. 2:20; Ruth 2:14), into which a moral imperative was imported: “Share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house” (Isa. 58:7; Ezek. 18:7). The Epistle of James (2:1-7) upbraids those who dishonour the poor, the Epistle to the Hebrews speaks proignantly of oppression suffered by the wretched poor who depend on *philadelphia*, “brotherly love” (13:1-2 RSV).

- C. CLIFTON BLACK, *The Lord's Prayer*, (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press) p.147.