

Can beggars be choosers?

Jesus didn't lose many arguments, but he lost this one; and we are the better for it. The Syrophenician (henceforth Syrian) mother would not take “no” for an answer. She was a beggar who would be chosen. Jesus says, *Mark 7:27–28 (NRSV)* *“Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”*²⁸ *But she [answers] him, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”*

Game, set, match – she wins. Jesus loses, and we are better for it. The beggar is chosen.

It's a surprise to see Jesus lose. It's a shock to consider, “He could be wrong.” And maybe, maybe that's just what we need; a model for how to lose and be gracious; a reminder that being a Christian is about more than being right and on the winning side; being a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ, is being open to the God-given possibility that beggars can be chosen.

① Begging the Question

Begging the question is the flawed logic of saying that something is true because it's true. It assumes what it asserts.

I wonder if Jesus begs the question with the Syrian woman. Jesus assumes that Jews (the children) have a special place at God's table and that Gentiles (the dogs) do not. That was standard operating procedure in 1st century Israel. It is still standard operating procedure in many places; anytime we distinguish that we are “in” and they are “out,” we're making that assumption, but just because it is standard operating procedure doesn't make it true. We could be begging the question.

Truth matters to us Presbyterians. One of the Foundations of the Presbyterian way is that “truth is in order to goodness.... And that no opinion can be more pernicious or more absurd than that which brings truth and falsehood upon a level and represents it as of no consequence what a man's opinions are. On the contrary, we are persuaded that there is an inseparable connection between faith and practice, truth and duty. Otherwise it would be of no consequence either to discover truth or

to embrace it.”

Truth matters to us. To be a Presbyterian is to be a seeker of truth. That’s the mission of Christian Education – to help us develop the discernment that connects our faith and our practice, especially when the rubber hits the road. Sunday School isn’t just for our children, because the quest for truth is a life-long, life-changing journey.

On that journey, we will have encounters with the Syrian woman. We will meet people who do not fit any of our molds, who cross all our lines, who are the epitome of “them;” those who are not like “us.” We will hear questions that challenge all our pre-conceived notions about what is true and what is false. We’ll meet beggars who would be chosen.

We who are Christian are not known for handling these questions well; we rarely navigate the boundary between “us” and “them” gracefully. All too often, our quest for truth closes our minds rather than opening them. We settle on certainties that are beyond dispute. We beg the question, and woe to the one who tries to pry apart the mind we’ve sealed shut! They just may discover that we have a demon.

Jesus was better than that. Yes, he begged the question; he had pre-conceived notions, and he acted according to them – he was human; but he didn’t stop there. His mind wasn’t closed. He was open to see a woman of faith. He was open to hear a mother’s cry. He was open to the truth that God’s love and mercy and grace are bigger than our pre-conceived notions; deeper than our doubts; and mightier than our fears.

And that’s the truth she begged to question.

2 Beggars Can Be Chosen

Jesus doesn’t lose many arguments, but he lost this one; and he was better for it. The Syrian woman begged and was chosen. “They” (whoever “they” are) begged and this deaf man with a speech impediment was chosen. Jesus lost the argument, and outsiders got in. Beggars were chosen.

We Presbyterians are known as God’s “frozen chosen.” We celebrate God’s choice to give us grace that leads us to faith and salvation, but we’re also known for keeping our celebration to ourselves, hence “frozen chosen.”

Truth is, we take our place at the table for granted. Of course, we have a seat. Of course, a meal is prepared for us. Of course, we are going to get fed. We’re children of God; we belong.

We take that for granted. We treat it as our birth right. We are entitled. We are chosen.

The beggars we meet question our place of privilege; they challenge our status. And if we are open to hear what they have to say, we are better for what the beggar begs to question.

We are better, because we are humble; humble enough to open our ears and our minds to listen to what “they” have to say.

John Calvin says very little about his conversion, but in the introduction to his commentary on the Psalms, he gives us a glimpse. He speaks of God “making his heart teachable.”

That’s a beggar’s gift. Beggars remind us that we also have needs. Beggars remind us that what we have, we too have received. It doesn’t belong to us. We didn’t earn it. We don’t deserve it. We were given it, so there is no reason in truth it is the height of folly to be proud of the knowledge we possess.

Pride closes our minds; humility opens them. Humility makes our hearts teachable. Humility offers us the opportunity to be changed, converted, transformed by God; to have our ears opened so we can hear that God loves us; to have our tongue loosed so we can sing God’s praise; to have our demon cast out so we can be free from fear.

Humility holds out the promise that the “frozen chosen” can thaw. Beggars can be chosen.

Jesus doesn’t lose many arguments, but he lost this one; he was better for it, and so are we. We don’t have to win every argument. Sometimes the truth is learned when

we’re humbled by a loss. Sometimes a beggar is our teacher, and we, the “frozen chosen” are the pupils. Christian Education isn’t just for our children. Be a life-long learner. Open your mind. When the pupil is ready, the teacher will come, and we will know this truth – beggars can be chosen. Amen.