

## **God of Mongrels – September 6, 2015 – Mark 7**

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Today's gospel lesson contains perhaps one of the most controversial texts of the Bible. Scholars, professors, commentators, and even regular folks like us debate about what exactly is going on here.

Here's the problem. A Gentile woman comes to Jesus for help for her daughter. Jesus replies, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Yep, you heard right. Jesus just called this woman a dog. A very un-Jesus-like thing to do. But before we jump right onto dissecting that unflattering statement, let's back up just a little bit and revisit the context.

After last week's debate between Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees about the ritual purity laws, the scene changes. Jesus decides to leave Jerusalem and head for the region of Tyre. That would be in the vicinity of the present day country of Lebanon. It was a Gentile territory. It was considered to be unclean and impure – a place where the people were all thought to be just a bunch of pagans. A place where any self-respecting Jew drove down the road with the windows up and the doors locked, or the women walked down the street keeping a firm grip on their purses and their children. It was a place reviled and scorned.

And it was to this place that Jesus journeyed. He wanted to get away from the crowds that shadowed him. He wanted to go to a place where he could be anonymous. He was tired. Tired of debating with the religious leaders, tired of healing every sick person within walking or carrying distance, tired of having to explain every little thing to his thick-headed disciples. He needed a retreat, a mini-vacation, a little down time. Shut the blinds, lock the door, take the phone off the hook. Jesus is on break. Is that so surprising to us? Our doctrine reminds us that in addition to being fully divine, Jesus was also fully human. Being human, he needed rest just like we all do.

The text tells us – Jesus arrived in Tyre. "He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice." Even without Facebook, Twitter and TV, somehow word got out that Jesus was in town. Like our celebrities and sports stars of today, who can't seem to turn around without making headline news, the first century version of the paparazzi were already on his heels.

Jesus is tired, and he's anticipating some much-needed rest. But before he has a chance to plop down in the easy chair and put his feet up on the foot stool, someone begins banging on the door. I can almost hear his sigh of frustration. He is human after all.

One pastor in Kentucky shared this story. She said that when she got to her current church, she made it widely known that Monday was her day off. It was published in the church newsletter, announced in worship, posted on the church office door, and recorded on the church voice mail. People respected that. Yet still, her cell phone rang on Mondays. People showed up on her doorstep at her home on Mondays. Funerals were scheduled for Mondays, people got sick and went into the hospital on Mondays. She wrestled with how to handle this. Does she ignore people in crisis on Mondays, just because it's her day off? Of course not.

And this doesn't just happen to ministers. Think of the teacher who voluntarily chooses to stay after school day after day because one student needs extra help with his math homework. Think of the college professor who schedules a make-up exam for a Saturday afternoon for a student who missed the first one. Or new parents who are awakened throughout the night to care for their infant. Or the waiter who has to stay an extra two hours because the person on the next shift is running late. Or the daycare worker who has to stay longer because one child's parents have yet to come pick her up. Or the manager at the convenience store who has to pull a double because his night shift person is sick. Or the doctor who schedules an emergency surgery on her day off.

People may not be overly happy about it, but many are willing to go the extra mile when called upon to do so. Going the extra mile, sounds like something Jesus once said, doesn't it? And when other people are relying on your willingness to do so, is there really any other choice? That doesn't mean we don't grumble about it, but we go ahead and follow through.

So Jesus answers the door, and before he can get a word out, a Gentile woman knelt down at his feet and began begging him to cast out the demon that was tormenting her little daughter. Many things separated these two individuals, besides the doorway that stood between them. Her ethnicity was a problem. Gentiles and Jews did not interact. Her religion was a problem. She was a pagan. They did not worship God in the same way. And her gender was a problem. Men and woman did not speak together in public.

She knew these prohibitions as well as he did, but the concern for the welfare of her daughter galvanized her actions. She was at her wits end. She could not do anything to help her daughter. No one in the region of Tyre could do anything to help her daughter. The one person who could do something was Jesus. She believed that in her heart. She had never met him before, but the stories about him had reached her ears. And somehow, somehow, she believed that he could cure her child.

And it's at this point in the story where we all expect Jesus to look lovingly down at the woman weeping at his feet, pull her up by hand to stand before him, gently smile at her strength of character and say, "Great is your faith, my child. Your daughter is healed. Go in peace." After all, Jesus is the one who knocks down all barriers. He's healed Gentiles of demon possession before. He's interacted with women in public before. Didn't Jesus just get done telling the Pharisees and the scribes that it's what's in the heart that matters most? That nothing on the outside of a person can make that person unclean. What makes someone unclean is the evil intentions of the heart. This Gentile woman has come to him with the purest of intentions. She profoundly believes in his healing abilities – she begs him to cure her beloved child. Yet he refuses. Is he doing something that he just told the Pharisees not do? Judging someone based on outside appearances?

He says 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." He's referring to the children of Israel, the people of the covenant. And of course, he himself is the food, the Bread of Life. His ministry is supposed to be for the

children of Israel. Sure along the way, he may encounter a Gentile or two, but his focus is supposed to be on Israel. And right now he's tired and on vacation.

Now this is where some folks get a little squeamish and try to temper down Jesus' words. They try to explain that this is some kind of Jewish proverb, and Jesus is just reciting it by rote but doesn't really believe it in his heart. Or others want to say that being called a dog is okay, because he's referring to a cute little puppy that has a special place in the home. Or still others say, that Jesus intends to help the woman, but chooses to test her faith first by pretending to refuse. There are even some that say Jesus really didn't say these words, and that it was some later addition to the story.

Let's just assume here that Jesus did in fact say those words, and let's also understand that being called a dog in that particular culture was considered an insult. Dogs did not have the special place in society that we have given them. They were considered to be scavengers and to Jews they were unclean animals. Remember, before we try to sugarcoat Jesus' words, he is recorded as saying many shocking things. In last week's lesson, he called his opponents a brood of vipers. Later on in his ministry he will call Peter by the name Satan. Often he refers to the people of Israel as sheep – and sheep are pretty stupid animals. So I think it's safe to say, Jesus calls them like he sees them.

And in this particular case, Jesus says to this Gentile woman, "I am here for the children of Israel. I am supposed to minister to the Jews." Could it be that Jesus was ignorant of his ministry reaching beyond the Jewish people? Is that really such a stretch, to think that he might have been mistaken about the scope of his ministry? After all, Jesus was human as well as divine. And as a human, he had to learn things. When he was a little tyke and went off to Jewish preschool, he had to learn his alphabet and numbers just like all the other kids. When he got older and helped Joseph in the workshop, he probably hit his thumb with the hammer a few times, before he got the hang of it. In the gospel of Luke, there's the scene of 12 year old Jesus at the temple, sitting with the elders, asking them questions and learning from them. They were shocked by his giftedness for understanding, but he still needed to learn. And so at this point in his ministry, Jesus believed that his task was to reach the Jews. Perhaps this was the turning point. Perhaps it was this Syrophenician woman who expanded that perception for him.

The woman's response is brilliant. She doesn't take offense at being called a dog. She understands her place in the society of that time. It doesn't mean she likes it, but she is not thwarted in her persistence. She responds to him, "Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." She is asking him, isn't there enough of you to go around? As you minister to your people, the Jews, can we Gentiles not partake of the overabundance? The woman shows a great deal of courage and determination, she refuses to admit defeat.

And somehow in that moment, Jesus realizes a new aspect of his ministry. When he tells people they must love their neighbor as themselves, no longer does neighbor just refer to a fellow Jew, those inside the covenant. The concept of neighbor, of loving those in need, has expanded to include everyone. The new covenant would extend to all people on earth. I think

Jesus was shocked by this new understanding of his ministry. That his love and grace extended to everyone, not just one nation of people. And no longer would he think in terms of feeding one group of people first and tossing the crumbs to everyone else. Everyone was equal in the eyes of God. This was a pretty radical idea. This still is pretty radical idea.

If you think about it, none of us deserves to be fed by Jesus. None of us even deserves the crumbs. We really are dogs, mongrels, sinners who don't deserve a single morsel from Christ. But through his extravagant grace, he chooses to feed us anyway. And what a gift that is, because it is through him that we are made whole.

This story from the gospel of Mark never really bothered me. For in it, we get see the human Jesus. The Jesus who gets tired, who needs a vacation, who gets grumpy when people ask him for stuff, and who can make an honest mistake out of ignorance. A Jesus who truly experienced humanness in his own life can better understand our humanness. He can relate to humanity, because he experienced it himself.

But there's something else I like about this passage from Mark. It's in this story where we see the gospel message open up to all people. Suddenly all the boundaries come crashing down. The divisions between nationality, religion, gender – all gone in an instant. Jesus realizes that his message of God's good news extends beyond the covenant people, into what will be a new covenant with all humanity. And so without further ado, Jesus pronounces the daughter healed. The demon has left her body, and she has been made whole.

I like to imagine that somewhere in the region of Tyre there was a surprised little Gentile girl, who no longer suffered any torment, a little girl who had no idea her mother had the courage, persistence and determination to convince the Messiah that even the mongrels needed God.