

Loving God – Help to understand that we know you best, when we meet you in other people. People who are different than ourselves. People who challenge the barriers and boundaries that we erect around our lives, our families, our churches. Amen.

even
the dogs
under the
table eat
the
children's
crumbs



Today, we meet Jesus in perhaps his most unflattering posture. We meet him at his most human.

Jesus is tired. As we have followed the story of Jesus as it was preserved in Mark's gospel, Jesus has just fed the 5,000 and continued his running dialogue with the

Pharisees. Jesus can't go anywhere in his home region of the Galilee without being recognized. The people follow him everywhere he goes, always expecting him to teach them, to feed them, and to heal them.

So Mark tells us that Jesus practices a little self-care and goes on retreat. Up to a safe house in Tyre. Far away for his home territory. In fact – it's so far north of the Galilee that's it's not even Jewish countryside. He's gone up to the coast for some R&R and to relax in a 'safe-house.' Little does Jesus know that it is in Tyre that he will meet a woman who will change the course of his life and his ministry forever.

As Mark unfolds his story, we meet a young woman *in absentia*. She doesn't appear in person, but she is the foil in the plot, around whom Mark weaves his tale. She is a girl – described as her mother's "little daughter" - who had the misfortune of being possessed of a demon. But she was also a young person who had the good fortune of a parent who was determined – even doggedly determine we could say – to seek the best for her child. She wanted her child to be made whole.

But there is a problem. Remember that Jesus has gone to Tyre – outside of the Jewish homeland. So far in the story of Jesus, as Mark reduced it to writing, the ministry of Jesus has been directed to his own Hebrew tribe. The Jewish faith had been preserved through the centuries based on the firm understanding that they were God's chosen people. The heirs of a covenant established by God, first with Abraham, then confirmed with Isaac and Jacob. Renewed with Moses. And 'established forever' with King David. For devout Hebrew people of that time, their relationship with God was preserved and maintained by their 'setting themselves apart.' They set themselves apart by a variety of dietary laws and customs, family and cultural traditions, and most especially, by a strong identity with 'the tribe.' This was the culture into which Jesus was born. As we have encountered Jesus in the gospel of Mark, up until today, his life's work seems to have been completely within the framework of his 'Jewishness.' But he hadn't yet met the Syro-Phoenician woman.

Here was a woman with a single goal in mind. She didn't care that Jesus was on retreat. She didn't care that he was Jew and she was a Gentile. She didn't care that he was a man and she was woman. All she cared about was that her little daughter was sick, and she believed that Jesus could make her well.

So she knocked on that door, knelt before Jesus and asked for his help. And in that moment, Jesus encountered ‘the Other.’

The ‘Other’ - that person whom you don’t expect. Someone who is beyond your expectations. The person who is completely outside your frame of reference – who you never consider at all. The ‘Other.’

When first engaged by the Syro-Phoenician woman, Jesus reacted like the first-century Jewish male that he was. He utterly dismissed her. Both her and her little daughter. To the Jews in the time of Jesus the Gentiles were dogs. And I don’t mean the type of lap dogs and house pets that we have today. Dogs were most often wild. In the streets – mangy – filthy – disgusting. They ate garbage. They were disgusting.

And that’s how Jesus referred to this woman, and her little daughter who was sick.

Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.

To make it a little more clear:

I’m not going to heal your daughter. The Hebrew people have first call on my attention and my ministry. It wouldn’t be right for me to ‘waste’ my attention on someone like you, a dirty, disgusting Gentile woman.

Jesus at his most human.

What would you have done, if you had been that woman. I can imagine the back of my neck getting red. My face blushing with anger and humiliation. My eyes watering with tears. My feet turning around. And walking away – if not running away. But if that’s the response that Jesus expected, he was in for a surprise. This woman could give as good as she could get.

You think Gentiles are dogs? she said.” You think me and my little girl are like dogs? Fine – go ahead and think that. Be-that-as-it-may –

even the dogs get to eat the crumbs that fall under that table. Now – give me a crumb!! Heal my little girl – and I’ll go on my way!”

“Okay – okay.” Jesus seems to say.” I get your point. Sorry. I’m just a little tired, that’s all. Go on home – you’ll find your daughter is well.”

Jesus – the human, Jewish, male Jesus – needed to change. But in order to change, he had to meet the ‘Other.’

I suspect that we are all in the same boat as Jesus. We all need to change. We all need to meet the ‘other.’ We all need to meet our own Syro-Phoenician woman. We need to meet our own Syro-Phoenician woman because we have all erected barriers and boundaries in our lives. In our families, in our cities, our society, and even in our churches.

When we do that – when we construct a barrier around ourselves, we are really building a barrier between ourselves and God. Dorothy Day, one of the great lay leaders of the Catholic faith in the 20th century put it like this:

I really only love God as much as I love the person I love the least.

We love God only as much as we love the person who we love the least.

Jesus needed to change. Just as we do. Jesus was a creature of his culture. A culture that had taught him that the Kingdom of God as a zero-sum equation. An understanding of God that said

There’s only so much to go around. We’ve got to take care of ourselves. We’ve got to preserve what we have for our own children’s sake.

That understanding of God erects a barrier between the believer and God. God’s love is not finite. It isn’t true that ‘there’s only so much to go around.’ That’s what the Syro-Phoenician woman taught Jesus that day in Tyre. That’s the lesson that we need to learn as well. There is more to God’s grace and love than we can possibly ask or imagine.