

## A Lesson from the Dogs

*Mark 7: 24-30*

From there he 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.

Imagine yourself sitting around the table for a meal with family and extended family. Pull up a chair where three, maybe four generations are all represented. Everyone holds hands to pray, then it's time to dig in. As the food gets shuffled around there is another presence who meanders into the room hoping for some scraps. Watch as our furry four-legged friend sits patiently, taking up leg room under the table. Waiting for the crumbs to fall off the children's plates to the floor. "It's not fair," says Jesus, "to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Did you hear him? Jesus calls the Syrophenician woman a "dog." Maybe not her directly. But certainly her "kind." Those who spoke with her vernacular. Those whose skin was shaded a different tone. Their race determined their privileges. Jesus, and those like him, had a place at the family table. Her place was on the floor—where the crumbs fell, like a dog.

Begin with a memory. Do you remember the first time you realized race was an issue? What was a moment when you noticed that some were privileged with more while others were treated as less? Maybe the question takes us back to our childhood. A youngster on the playground who had made a new friend. Kicking up sand with our feet, giggling as we rode down the slide. But a parent saw who you were playing with and snatched you away saying, "It's time to leave." "Why?" you protested. "Because you're not supposed to be playing with *them!*" Or perhaps it was when you were a bit older. You were starting to become aware of the patterns in society which lumped human beings into groups of "us" and "them." And as we ate our meals around the dinner table our ears would pick up our loved one using a racial slur when talking about *them*. Or maybe we woke up when we heard a person of color sharing about their experiences. Injustices we had no idea still existed because we were well-protected inside of our white armor. When I was sixteen, I remember waiting at the DMV to get my driver's license. In front of me was a young black man talking to his father: "I know dad, only go a maximum of five miles over the speed limit. Make a complete stop at all stop signs..." "And?" his father asked. "And keep my title and license on the dashboard." *Keep the title and license on the dashboard?* It didn't make much sense to me at the time. But now I know it was a way of not making a sudden movement which could be misinterpreted if he got pulled over. When was the moment for you? What is the story? When did you realize some were raised with privilege while others were not?

Well, believe it or not, but in our gospel story race is the problem. Even for Jesus. In an insolent moment he calls the woman a dog. Jesus is far away from home. He's off the reservation, deep inside of Gentile country. He is on retreat and wants to be left alone. Instead, an outsider woman invades his personal space. She is desperate. A mother with a tormented child. And in the moment, Jesus doesn't care about her needs. He doesn't consider all the sleepless nights the woman lays awake worrying. He doesn't consider how powerless she must be feeling. He doesn't even ask her about her name. All he sees is that she is wrong: wrong gender. Wrong race. Wrong religion. Wrong timing. The racial slur slips too easily off his tongue: "Let Israel be fed first, for it is wrong to take the children's food and give it to the dogs!" Oh, how many have tried to soften his words. They've tried to claim it was simply the reality of his mission: Israel first and Gentiles eventually; or he was testing the woman's devotion. Others claim he is winking and smiling at her as he is saying it as if he doesn't really mean it. But the Jesus we see here is a fully-human product of his environment. Shaped by the implicit biases, the prejudices, the privileges of his culture just like we are. "It's not fair to take the children's food and toss it to the dogs," he says. It's hard to believe, but race is a problem, even for Jesus.

But here's the thing: the woman. The woman. The woman is the maker and shaker of the story. She is brilliant. She takes Jesus' words and schools him on his own gospel. She only gets one sentence—in Mark's gospel a total of five women only speak six sentences and she gets one of them. And with her one sentence she preaches using Jesus' own words: "Lord, even the dogs under the table get to eat the crumbs." She gets on her knees, like an NFL player protesting racism and says, "*Where is the good news for people like me and my daughter? Does her life not matter? Do people like me not matter to God?*" With a single sentence it cuts to the heart of God's boundary-breaking, taboo-busting, division-destroying message.<sup>1</sup> She preaches to Jesus and makes him face his own blind spot. It is the only instance in any of the gospels where Jesus loses an argument. To the woman. To the outsider. To the one who dares to gently hold Jesus' face to his issue: "Do people like me not matter to God?"

So, what does Jesus do? Jesus straightens up and changes his mind. He not only changes his mind, but he changes his ministry from this point on. "Because of your teaching to me [in the Greek, its *Logos*], or because of your "word" to me your daughter is healed." Too many times we treat Jesus as if he floats five feet above the ground. As if there is no room for Jesus to learn and grow. And in doing so we not only strip him of his humanity and humility, but we end up missing the point of this pivotal story in Mark's gospel. You see, in the previous chapter Jesus feeds 5,000 people in a deserted place in Galilee and there are twelve baskets left over—twelve, of course, representing the twelve tribes of Israel. Then Jesus encounters the Syrophenician woman. Then, the first thing he does in the next chapter is feed 4,000 hungry people. Except, this time it is in Gentile territory with seven baskets leftover. Seven baskets: the number of God's perfect completion; more, God's wholeness. Now do you remember what Jesus said to the

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<sup>1</sup> I borrow this language from a blog by Debie Thomas, found at [www.journeywithjesus.net](http://www.journeywithjesus.net)

woman? “It is not fair to give the children’s food to the dogs.” But what is the first thing he does in the next chapter? *Jesus feeds the dogs!* We miss the hinge moment if we don’t allow Jesus the room to be human and to grow in his life too. The woman preaches the gospel and it changes him; it changes his entire ministry.

Well, do you know what? I believe this church has lived this story. You have listened to those who have been labeled as less than, you have chosen to embrace every person and it has changed the identity of this church. Remember thirty-or-so years ago when one of our member’s children came out to her? She came to you and it was as if God was gently holding your heads to a situation you couldn’t ignore. It was a Syrophenician woman moment, and has God not expanded your purpose beyond what you had envisioned for yourselves? And we keep growing into it. Last week, the session voted to have Trinity march in the PRIDE parade, not as individuals, but as Trinity Presbyterian Church. We are even buying a banner! Or remember twenty-five or so years ago when racially motivated incidences in Winston Salem caused us to join the Inter-racial Dialogue?<sup>2</sup> We sat around tables and listened to the horrible stories told by our new black friends and it opened us up to a wider vision in the community. And we keep growing into it. A couple months ago our session voted to formally endorse the Black Lives Matter movement. You’ve listened to the needs of those who have been outcasted by society and you have been changed. The Syrophenician moments have shaped our identity as a church.

The good news is: if fully human, fully divine Jesus can keep growing and learning about who he is and what God is calling him to do; and if fully human, fully divine Jesus can spit out a racial slur one moment and the next change admitting he was wrong. And if fully human, fully divine Jesus can receive the gospel from an outsider, and then use his privilege to lift them up for the sake of justice and joy. Well, then by grace of God, so can we. So. Can. We.

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<sup>2</sup> The three tragic incidents occurred in 1992 shortly after the Rodney King verdict. The first involved an African-American woman who had been arrested for drug charges. She was bound, gagged and jailed by local law enforcement where she died in the cell unattended. The second happened when four white men murdered an African-American transient, cutting off his genitals and stuffing them into his mouth. His body was found under a local bridge. The third involved four African-American boys who hijacked a road grader with its keys still in the ignition. After being confronted by a white police officer, they ran over his car crushing the officer inside.