

As a Christian, and therefore someone who is supposed to be disciplining myself to act like Christ, there are some things I wish Jesus hadn't said. Like, love your enemies, turn the other cheek, forgive seventy seven times. But particularly as a preacher, there are a few things I really, really wish Jesus hadn't said, and very near the top of that list is today's gospel reading where he calls the Syrophenician woman, or maybe even her sick daughter, a dog. Now, one temptation is for me to try to save Jesus from himself. I could try to tell you that Jesus was a product of his upbringing and this was a culturally acceptable thing to say, or that Jesus knew all along how this scene was going to play out and said what he did to test the woman or teach his disciples, or that Jesus was a dog lover so this isn't as bad as it sounds. He called her a dog. It's exactly as bad as it sounds, so let's deal with it.

Jesus is traveling in Gentile territory, where his reputation as a healer and exorcist seem to have preceded him. The Syrophenician woman, a Gentile, has a few strikes against her—gender, ethnicity, religion—but she goes to see Jesus anyway to advocate on behalf of her daughter, whom she has left at home, but who was possessed by a demon. That may have been a first century way of explaining some kind of illness, or she may have been experiencing horror-movie kind of stuff. The woman begs Jesus to help her, but Jesus answers: *Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.*

Jesus is not just being run-of-the-mill nasty. He is saying that his mission of preaching, teaching, feeding, healing, and driving out demons is supposed to be first for the Jews, not for the Gentiles. So it's not even personal; he really calls most of the whole known world dogs. If we look back at the Old Testament, we read that the people of Israel are chosen by God, but the life that they live out under God's law is intended not just for their own well-being but to serve as inspiration to their neighbors until the whole world comes to worship the Lord. Similarly, Jesus' ministry, which certainly starts out among the people of Judea, will eventually extend to the whole world. Jesus seems to be saying that it's not time for that yet. The woman sees it differently.

Although she's a Gentile, the Syrophenician woman does something very consistent with Israel's tradition: she persists until Jesus answers her request. If we remember way back to the stories of the patriarchs, Jacob wrestles with an angel of the Lord all night and will not release him until the angel blesses him. That was when his name was changed to Israel—the name the whole nation chose for their identity—not the people of Adam or Noah or Abraham or

Isaac, but the people of Israel, the name that means “I have striven with the Lord and prevailed.” If at first you don’t like the answer God gives you, it is perfectly consistent with salvation history to keep on trying until you wrestle a blessing out of God.

The woman is not deterred. *Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.* As the owner of a dog who has been known to hang out under tables, I’ve got to say, she has a point: if you don’t want the dog looking for crumbs, keep him out of the dining room. I’m not sure what Jesus thought was going to happen when, fresh from feeding the 5,000, he shows up in Gentile territory. But here is a Gentile, not asking for another miraculous feeding for everyone in the region, not even asking something miraculous for herself, but pointing out to Jesus that maybe some of the metaphorical crumbs of leftovers from the multitude of the children of Israel might as well go to the dogs of Tyre instead of going to waste. Jesus doesn’t focus on her faith; it could just as well have been that he concedes she’s won the argument. In any event, she’s correct that there is plenty of Jesus’ power to go around; he sends her home to her child who is now freed from the demon.

But that’s maybe not the most remarkable part of the story. If we pay attention to the geography, and the fact that Mark, for all his brevity, includes the names of places and the routes Jesus takes to get to them would suggest that we’re supposed to pay attention to the geography, we notice that Jesus doesn’t return to Judea—at least not yet. He continued on, through and farther into Gentile territory, where he encounters and heals more Gentiles. It seems the Syrophenician woman talked Jesus into extending his ministry not just to her own child but to others who were not initially on Jesus’ agenda. That whole “God loving the world and sending the Son so whoever believes in him may have life” thing got going a little faster than Jesus planned.

So if we followers of Jesus want to take something away from what did not start out as Jesus’ finest hour, maybe this is it: we all have plans for how we think we should live into God’s calling in our lives, and if we’re honest, we all have opinions about who we think deserves our service. But if Jesus can pivot in response to people’s needs, set aside his plans, put himself where he’s likely to encounter challenging people, and ultimately cross barriers for the sake of others, then so can we. We are not called to easy things, but we are empowered by Jesus who never asks us to go where he hasn’t made a way or to walk without him beside us.