

A new teacher was meeting with the principal before the beginning of their first year teaching. The principal was called out of the office, and while they were gone, the teacher glanced at the principal's desk and saw a class roster with several more columns of information than the roster the teacher had. The teacher quickly copied that page before the principal returned, and then used it to plan their instruction over the course of the school year, tailoring the lessons to the needs of the individual students. In May, the principal called the teacher back to the office and asked if they could explain how their outcomes for the year deviated so much from the students' past performance. The teacher, proud that the plan had worked, decided to come clean, and handed over the roster they had copied at the beginning of the school year, saying, "Once I knew each student's IQ, I knew what I could reasonably expect them to achieve, so I gave each student individualized assignments ranging from remedial to advanced, and sure enough, the really smart students aced the most challenging work, and the students who aren't very bright still succeeded because I only gave them the simplest assignments." The principal studied the list of final grades and the class roster the teacher had copied, and finally said, "That was a remarkable plan, but those numbers aren't their IQs; those are their locker numbers." Thus ends our cautionary tale about allowing labels to define people.

Today's passage from Mark's gospel is one of the most dreaded texts that we're called to read and preach, because the hero of our story, Jesus, behaves in the worst possible way, forcing us to wrestle with what it means when the Son of God acts like a jerk. After a lot of hard work and arguments with the religious people, Jesus has gone away to Tyre, where he thinks he'll be able to spend some time off the grid. But even there, he is recognized, and a woman comes to ask him to exorcise a demon from her daughter. Mark notes that she's a gentile Syrophenician woman, which tells us that she is not Jewish and not among the people of Israel to whom Jesus considered himself primarily called. Yet we shouldn't be surprised to find her there, because Jesus is in *her* territory, not the other way around; I'm reminded of when I was in Mexico and overheard someone criticizing a local for only speaking Spanish, not English.

Possibly because of her religion, or ethnicity, or gender, Jesus dismisses her—and by extension, her ill daughter who isn't even there—as a dog begging for food that rightfully belongs to the children, an offensive way of saying that Jesus' healing work should be reserved for those who worship the God of Israel. There is no getting around the fact that Jesus calls her a dog; there is nothing historical or cultural that makes that any less offensive than it sounds. We absolutely do not expect Jesus to say something like that, because Jesus is Jesus; however, that is the kind of comment that anyone present at that time might have expected a tired celebrity to make when he was interrupted by a foreign heathen woman, begging him to work

during his time off. That is to say, it's pretty consistent with the way human beings usually act: someone in a position of power insulting and degrading someone who they consider to be "less than" because of their religion, ethnicity, citizenship, or gender. Sadly, this sounds familiar.

It's probably anachronistic to think of this unnamed woman as a civil rights activist, standing up for gentile Syrophenician women everywhere. She's a desperate mother talking to the person who has the ability to help her suffering child. She engages Jesus' metaphor, "Even the dogs under the table get the children's crumbs" which is a pretty clever way of saying that the man who was powerful enough to miraculously feed thousands probably has enough generosity, compassion, and energy left over to help her ailing daughter without depriving the people of Israel—who again, aren't even there—from receiving Jesus' gifts of healing. Jesus doesn't apologize, but he at least agrees with her to the extent that he grants her request, and without even going in person, pronounces her daughter freed from the evil spirit.

There's a strong urge to try to rescue Jesus from himself here, to save his reputation, to make his response seem less callous and less prejudiced. But that's hard to do. If we say that he was just testing the woman...does a gracious, loving God demand tests of faith? If we say that Jesus needed to be persuaded...do you want a God who has to be argued into helping? If we say that he let this scene play out for the benefit of those who were watching...do we want a Jesus who uses desperate mothers as object lessons? If we say that Jesus' heart grew three sizes that day...it's not that I'm opposed to the idea of God having the capacity for change, just that if it's up to human beings to teach God to be more merciful, we're all in big trouble.

I don't have an easy answer for why Jesus said what he said. But what Jesus *did* was heal the daughter of the woman who dared to ask—and dared to persist in asking. Jesus healed her even though she wasn't the "right" religion or ethnicity, even though she was only a child, a girl, even though she wasn't even able to be there to ask for help herself. And then the next time Jesus encounters someone who, based on where Jesus found him, was probably also a foreign gentile, and who was also on the margin of the community because of his disabilities, who was also unable to speak for or help himself, Jesus healed him. Jesus says "Be open" to the man whose ears and mouth had been closed, but first, Jesus himself had to be open to helping those who needed him—even if they would have been labeled as outsiders to Jesus' initial mission. It is human nature to identify all the ways in which a person doesn't fit into a particular group, to argue that their struggles aren't our problem. But it is divine nature to love and care for them anyway. The world expects us to give the answer Jesus gave at the beginning of today's passage, then let people fend for themselves. Let's not forget that the story ends with Jesus' healing power breaking every boundary to restore those who needed him.