

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

Wait...did Jesus just insult this random woman, calling her and her people mongrel dogs who lurk about begging for food? Did we hear that right? That certainly doesn't sound like the Jesus I know! Mark's gospel report has Jesus hiding himself away in some house in a foreign country, in the region of Tyre, and when this non-Jewish woman finds him and begs for a miracle, he is rude, so rude, to her! He says, in so many rude words, that his miracles, his exorcisms of demons, is meant first for the Jewish people, and that blessing anybody else with them would be like taking candy from the mouths of babes and throwing it away. Does that sound like the Jesus you think you know? Is that what you'd expect him to say? Well, you can imagine how many times this passage has had good Christians scratching their heads over the past 2000 years. And you can probably imagine how many time preachers and commentators have tried, in their own interpretation, to explain it away! Perhaps you've heard them do just that...

Some have said that Jesus is just trying to goad or prompt the woman into speaking her faithful mind, kind of a hyperbolic challenge. And, in fact, her clever response is just that; if that was Jesus' intent, well then, it worked. Some have pointed out that the Greek word used her by Mark implies that the dogs were 'small dogs', maybe cute little helpless puppies, who needed to be cared for by their Jewish betters, for whom the granting of miraculous exorcisms would only make them better caretakers of the whole kennel, the whole non-Jewish world. And others have preached that what Jesus is really trying to teach here is patience, that it is a virtue to wait one's turn when there are others in greater need...which sounds a lot like 'knowing your prescribed place' in the pecking order. That's kind of insulting, too, isn't it? Especially when said to a woman, who has the moxie to step out of her place and speak her mind to a stranger, a strange man in fact. A woman's place in those times was clearly meant to be second-class. What was Jesus thinking?!

It is interesting, BTW, to look at how the other gospel authors dealt with this same event. The gospels of Matthew and Luke were written just a few short years later, and contextually we can tell that they each had Mark's writings as a reference. But while Mark's gospel was just put out there for everyone, scholars think that Matthew and Luke had specific audiences in mind, that they were writing to different groups of people. Matthew seems to have been writing specifically to a Jewish audience, or more precisely, Jews who had converted to Christianity. A better way to say it would be that he was writing to people of Jewish heritage who had diverted themselves from their former traditions to following the path of Jesus, who was, of course, himself Jewish. So, Matthew has Jesus say not only the insulting comparison of foreigners as 'dogs', but to go a step further and tell his disciples plainly that his mission was only to the 'lost sheep of Israel'. Perhaps that was an important point for Matthew's audience to hear. Luke, on the other hand, whose gospel seems to have been written for converts who had not originally been Jewish, Romans for example, well, Luke dumps the whole event with the Syrophoenician woman altogether. He doesn't even bring it up. Maybe he didn't want to risk *their* being insulted by Jesus.

In any case, dear friends, we are always going to come away from hearing or reading this passage with lots of questions. It's hard to know what was in Jesus' mind that day in that place, what could possibly have motivated him to say what he did, but maybe having questions raised, and being prompted to live with those questions, was the clever point and purpose of Mark's written work. I know that these and other questions keep my faith a little curious and edgy, and I'm going to be sure to ask these questions of Jesus when I someday get to meet him face to face! Meanwhile, I personally choose to give Jesus the benefit of the doubt that there was a good reason for him to behave as he did, and not that it was just because he was tired and cranky and worn-out from travel and travail. And meanwhile, there are some remarkable ironies in today's passages about the woman who comes begging for help and the deaf man who is brought to Jesus for healing.

Ironically, if Jesus does think that foreigners, Gentiles, are like dogs, then why does he take his mission

to these foreign lands? He leads his disciples out of familiar Galilee, with all its Jewish faithfulness, north to Tyre and Sidon, and even around to the eastern side of the Lake to the wild and wooly Decapolis region where the towns and villages are without any real jurisdiction or law. He leads his most trusted followers out of their comfort zone into the unknown and disliked. Is he taking them on a vacation away from work? Is he escaping the exertions of all these exorcisms? Did he expect to find the peace and quiet of anonymity there? No such luck. Even the uncouth and lawless Gentiles have heard of his reputation, and are inclined to believe what he has been preaching. They flock to him just like their Jewish counterparts, to hear and experience more of his good news. For fact, it is, ironically, even better news for them. Is this really what Jesus expected when he started this trip? Would he have even decided to take the time if he known it would be like this? Does God's Spirit drive him there for some utilitarian purpose?

And, for whatever reason, Jesus insists that his presence there in foreign territory be kept a secret. Perhaps he hopes his reputation will not, in fact, proceed him. Perhaps he wants people to experience him first hand before they form an opinion. Perhaps he is concerned that his identity, his reputation will be distorted by heresay, and not accurately reflect his true mission. Perhaps his miraculous works might be misinterpreted as mere magic and his miraculous good news misinterpreted as political rhetoric. In any case, he would prefer to stay out of the limelight, at least until he can have a personal contact and develop a real relationship in God's name. The irony is, though, that the more he insists on this anonymity, the more his reputation is proclaimed. Case in point: A deaf man from this foreign region is brought to Jesus by some well-wishers for a ritual healing. Now, the deaf man has never been able to hear Jesus teach or preach, and may not even have heard of him by reputation. The Spirit obliges Jesus to heal the man, but unlike the woman Mark mentions earlier, he is unable to have that kind of clever conversation with him about matters of faith, so he does this little ritual with the fingers and the spitting and the tongue-touching, and Lo and behold, the man is able to hear! But there is a side-effect, isn't there?! The man can not only hear, but now he can speak plainly and be understood for the first time. And what will he do? Well, of course he will proclaim Jesus and how God's power has worked through him. Just what Jesus doesn't seem to want! The more Jesus acts out of love, the more his fragile reputation of light is distributed by others throughout the realms of darkness, ironic as that is.

So, I ask you: how has this passage struck you this morning? When you heard me read it, did you get stuck at the disturbing apparent insult Jesus gives to the woman? Or did it cause you to reflect further on how you might relate to others in the context of your own faithfulness? Have you ever felt that God's Holy Spirit has prompted you out of your comfort zone, to mingle with people who are just plain different? And if you accept such opportunities the Spirit gives you, have you thought about how your own reputation might be impacted? Would it be more accurately represented by real personal contact with others, rather than be based on heresay? I don't think Jesus and his disciples were just on a well-deserved vacation when they made this trip to exotic, or maybe toxic, foreign regions; I think God wanted the point to be that the mission of Jesus, with all its reassurance of forgiveness, with all of its passing of the peace, with all its challenge of enlivening faith with good deeds, [that this mission] should be experienced first-hand by everyone, not just a chosen few.

Our parish, St. John's Oneida, is beginning an initiative which embraces these questions and which we hope will provide an opportunity, and a challenge, to get beyond our own comfort zone. This spiritual voyage will give us an opportunity to practice what we preach and what we promise at baptism: to 'strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of all persons'. We are calling this program "Oneida Listens." I have written about it in the Evangelist Newsletter which you will be receiving this week, so I ask you to please watch for it in your email or direct mail, and to please pray for its faithfulness. Amen.