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“Real Jesus”

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Nothing says “Welcome Back Sunday” like a gospel lesson where Jesus is a jerk

What is going on here?

Does Jesus act dismissively towards this woman and call her an ethnic slur, a “dog”?

Every commentary I read in preparation for my sermon this week confirmed, yes - yes he did

Writer and theologian, Debie Thomas, wrote in her reflection this week that it was this text that helped her see the “Real Jesus” rather than the “Perfect Jesus”<sup>1</sup> – and while this week’s story may be hard to swallow, I think this realization is important in a big way for all of us

And lest we think that discovering the “real Jesus” instead of the “perfect Jesus” would be a disappointment, I promise you it is not

Let’s consider the story and it’s context for just a moment

Mark starts out by telling us that “[Jesus] set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there.”

The region of Tyre was a Gentile community, so Jesus stepped out of his comfort zone for a moment to catch his breath, he was trying to be alone.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://journeywithjesus.net/essays/1907-be-opened>

Enter a woman of Syrophenician descent – a Gentile – who figured out Jesus was there and had heard of his power

She decided to go to him and to ask him to heal her daughter who is tormented by an unclean spirit

We know that this phrase, “an unclean spirit,” could mean a lot of things: mental illness, physical illness, social stratification for some reason or another – Mark is not specific and that could mean that the actual ailment is not as significant as what happens around it

So this woman begs for her daughter to be made well – to a preacher, teacher, prophet from a totally different ethnic group and religion, but one whose reputation has clearly preceded him

And when she asks for her daughter to be made well, Jesus replies: “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs”

There it is.

Elisabeth Johnson, a Pastor and retired professor notes that “while we cannot know exactly what Jesus was thinking, it is clear that when approached by the Syrophenician woman, Jesus’ immediate response is to appeal to the limits of his mission, his call to serve his own people.”<sup>2</sup>

The “children” of Israel, not the outsiders who were sometimes referred to by slurs like “dogs”

For a long time, theologians have done some faithful acrobatics to try to soften the blow of Jesus’ comment – Christians of at least the last century or so are not comfortable with a Jesus who would make a racial slur: the Jesus we’ve been taught to love is the loving Jesus, the kind Jesus, the

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-23-2/commentary-on-mark-724-37-3>

sinless Jesus, the “perfect Jesus” and *that* Jesus wouldn’t say this, or at least he wouldn’t have meant something mean by it, right?

Some scholars have thought: well, maybe he did say it but maybe he was saying it provocatively to test the faith of the woman who has come to him

But most scholars today simply recognize: Jesus responded....poorly

He speaks almost flippantly – the way we do when we’re exhausted, at our wits end, just wanting to be alone, and someone has the audacity to ask us for something

I’ve done it – I’ve done it as a spouse, I’ve done it as a parent, I’ve done it as a sibling, I’ve done it as a friend

Those moments where the words come out and they’re the words you want to say in that moment but they have an impact that you never really intended to inflict

Jesus said it, he said the words, and I wonder what he felt when the last word rolled off the tip of his tongue?

Did he regret it? Did he even realize he said it? Did he mean it?

And then, a remarkable thing happens: the woman, even in her layered-vulnerability, talks back!

Without missing a beat, she counters: “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs”

Did she say it with sass? Did she say it with trepidation? Indignation? Clear-voiced?

However she said it, she said it – and Jesus immediately realizes she’s right, he immediately realizes how closed off and short he was, he

immediately recognizes his own ignorance in the moment and he heals the child without even going near her: “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.”

Jesus is the one in the wrong here, and the Syrophenician woman’s faithful response is the lightning bolt and thunder clap that opens Jesus up

And, clearly, Jesus is deeply impacted by this event.

Immediately after this encounter with the Syrophenician woman, Jesus ventures on from the region of Tyre to the region of the Decapolis which is another Gentile region – another place it was unlikely and unprecedented that Jesus would go

And, it is in this foreign region that now a group of people come to him and bring a deaf and mute person and beg Jesus to heal him...and without hesitation, Jesus does so

Notice there are no skips in the verses in this week’s gospel lesson – it is quite clear that Jesus was transformed by his encounter with that woman, changed by their dialog

Matt Skinner, a New Testament scholar, writes: “Her persistence persuades Jesus to do new things in his ministry.”<sup>3</sup>

Or as Debie Thomas puts it: “Jesus changes. He allows a perspective foreign to his own to move him from an attitude of prejudice to an attitude of inclusion. He allows himself to be humbled, rearranged, and remade. Barbara Brown Taylor describes the moment this way: ‘You can almost hear the huge wheel of history turning as Jesus comes to a new understanding of who he is and what he has been called to do.’”

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-23-2/commentary-on-mark-724-37>

This is that “real Jesus” that Debie was talking about, a really *human* Jesus.

“Which is to say, he struggles, he snaps, he discovers, he grows, he falters, he learns, he fears, and he overcomes,” she writes. “[Jesus is] real, he’s approachable, and he’s authentically one of us. The ‘Good News’ is not that we serve a shiny, inaccessible deity who floats five feet above the ground. It is that Jesus shows us — in real time, in the flesh — what it means to grow as a child of God. He embodies what it looks like to stretch into a deeper, truer, and fuller comprehension of God’s love.”

Amen!

But also: changing his mind, being transformed by an encounter does not make Jesus any less divine – this isn’t the first time God changed God’s mind

God was *pretty* mad at the Israelites when they built that golden calf, that idol, on Mt. Sinai and it was Moses who pleaded with God not to respond in anger but to spare the people – and God did!

This is not the first time God changed their mind and it is worth noting that in the moments when God changes God’s mind, when God is persuaded to change the direction in which they were heading, it is always a change that points God in the direction of love, in the direction of grace, in the direction of inclusion, and justice, and mercy, and forgiveness

If Jesus can be persuaded, if God can change their mind and head in a new direction, what about us? And whose are the voices calling out to Jesus now, calling out to us, to pay attention, to change direction, and to bring healing?

Could it be the Paralympic athletes challenging all of our understandings of what people who embody differences of mind, body, and ability are capable

of and can we not change how people with disabilities are treated in our everyday life, too?

Could it be the families in Gaza and the peace activists in Israel who know peace is possible and who, even amid the violence and destruction, demand a ceasefire and a solution that values the human life and dignity of both Palestinians and Israelis?

Could it be our children and the children around our nation who are begging us to do something about the guns because all they want to do is go to school to learn and being an adolescent is hard enough never mind having to do so with the fear that you might not go home at the end of the day?

Could it be our climate, the smoke in the air, the record high temperatures, the swelling of the ocean and seas, calling out to us to preserve our planet which God entrusted to our care because it is not sure it has the ability to sustain our greed any longer?

It's possible that hearing all these things would make you want to retreat and not be bothered like Jesus at the beginning of our gospel lesson this morning - climate anxiety alone is a really palpable thing for me that weighs me down

Sometimes, in a really anxious moment, I want to snap and say: "isn't my composting and recycling enough?"

And, graciously, there are those who will raise their voices and ask "isn't the earth enough?"

And, I am changed

And, I can do more

And, I sigh, like Jesus sighed, as I lift up a prayer of gratitude for those voices, those brave “foreign” people who have called me into engagement

I am grateful to know the real Jesus, not the perfect Jesus, because I, then, can be the real me, not the perfect me

And, even the real me can change and can be called into the direction of love, grace, inclusion, justice, mercy, and forgiveness

Thanks be to God. Amen.