



If you're like me, when you heard the second half of that gospel reading, you might have done a little bit of a double-take: did we just hear that right? Did a mother desperate to heal her little girl come to Jesus and Jesus ignores her, and then compares her to a dog? What on earth is happening to Jesus today?

Is this the fully human Je- Jesus having an all too human moment? We've all known those, don't we, when we're exhausted or stressed out or overwhelmed, when our first reaction isn't necessarily our best. Or does her persistence actually change Jesus' mind, kinda Old Testament style, like Moses and Abraham once changed God's mind?

Maybe. Some preachers try to soften this story by suggesting that Jesus was merely testing her, which, I don't know, feels a bit cold to me. Others argue that Jesus was not insulting her at all, that giving children's food to the dogs was a kind of mini parable of sorts, illustrating the order of his mission: Jews first, Gentiles later.

Personally, I'd like to think that Jesus is actually preaching to the crowd here, that He's using this encounter to shine a light on their animosity to outsiders, deliberately saying the quiet part out loud, if you will, to underscore what He wants them to hear: that God's mercy is in fact for all, and not a select few. While I like that interpretation, it still seems like it comes at the mother's expense a bit too much. It's moments like this when I fall back onto something a seminary professor once told me years ago after I had asked him about another troubling passage in the Bible. He said, "Chris, to tell you the truth, I don't know if it happened exactly that way, but I know it's true.

I don't know if it happened that way, but I know it's true." In other words, holy scripture has the power to point us to truths deeper and more transformative than mere facts ever could. So what's the deeper truth here, perhaps? It occurs to me that no matter how you interpret this story, whether it's Jesus orchestrating a teachable moment or having a very human lapse or perhaps something in between, one thing is definitely true.

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Of all the arguments Jesus has in the Gospels that are not with his mother, this is the only one he loses. Of all the arguments he has with the Pharisees and the scribes, the strangers in the crowds, even with his own disciples, this is the only argument he ever loses. And not coincidentally, it's the only moment in the Gospels when Jesus is portrayed as taking the side of the very people he is usually arguing against, those who keep the boundaries, those who defend the hierarchies, those who spend their time trying to define who is a sinner and who is not.

For this moment at least, whether His heart is in it or not, Jesus is speaking their language. He's drawing their lines, he's echoing their prejudices, and when he loses the argument, that's when I think it reveals a deeper truth for us all. And that is, whenever we shut someone out, whenever we decide who counts and who doesn't, whenever we separate us versus them, that is an argument that we also need to lose so that love can win. God's circle is always wider than the one we're prepared to draw.

No matter how hard we work to expand it, no matter how inclusive we try to be, there will always be a next group. People that we don't even have the imagination for yet. Someone that we are perhaps completely blind to, yet nevertheless, they are waiting just outside those doors, waiting to be welcomed next.

That is the arc of history. It is the arc of scripture, arguably, always expanding our understanding of neighbor, and that is why it is still our work today. Because the boundaries that Jesus breaks down, they're not just the obvious ones. They're also the silent ones, the everyday ones, the boundaries so commonplace that we don't even notice them.

Notice in the story, nobody objects to the way the mother is being treated. Nobody says, "Hold on. This isn't right." Why? Because she's a Canaanite, we're told, a people who carried centuries of inherited fear and suspicion and stories about those people. For the Jews of that time, they were a people who fell so far outside the circle that nobody bats an eye at her mistreatment. So if Jesus is saying the quiet part out loud, maybe it's because so many of our own biases are also never spoken. They are unconscious. They're cultural. They're systemic. They're so woven into the daily life that we hardly notice them. But if you intentionally slow down and try to see them, you realize they are everywhere. It plays out in the people that we befriend because they look like us and think like us, and the people we avoid because they don't.

It is in the assumptions we make about who's safe and who isn't. It's in the respect we give because of someone's dress or their clothes or where they live. It's in

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the unspoken conclusions we draw, those little micro judgments that we make when we hear someone's been divorced or suffers from an addiction, or maybe has a child who struggles.

As my mom got older, she began to notice subtle changes in how people treated her. She noticed how people started to speak around her rather than to her, how her opinion seemed to not be as valued as it once was. But I think the thing that really bothered her the most was when total strangers started to call her "honey" or "sweetheart." That completely drove her crazy, and it didn't matter how nice they were trying to be or how helpful. She just wanted to be known by her name, not reminded of how old she had become. Even the mother in our gospel today, arguably, she kind of others her own daughter in a sense, calling her demon-possessed. Not because she's cruel, but because her world at that time had simply no language for all the various neurological conditions that we now understand today. Again, nothing malicious. She's simply being human, shaped by the limits of her time and her culture, just like we are today. The problem is that over time, being othered in that way can start to become internalized.

We can start to confuse feeling less than with who we actually are. We can grow so accustomed to being ignored or dismissed or left out that we can start to wonder, "Maybe they're onto something. Is there something true going on here?" All of which clouds our ability to see the image of God within all of ourselves in our very own mirror. But the good news is God will not let the world's labels be the last word. God remembers who we are even when we doubt ourselves and will never stop trying to find ways to remind us. I will never forget a conversation at coffee hour once at my last church. Years ago, Joe and I had just shared the news that we were going to be parents, and one of the vestry members who was standing nearby came over and he said something like how proud he was of us for our little "social experiment" of a family.

I did my best not to take offense. I tried to remind myself that, he was simply reaching for whatever language he had to describe a family he had probably never seen before. But to be completely honest, part of the reason I didn't say anything was that there was still a small part of me, deep down, that wondered if he might be right. Who was I to think that I could have a family like everyone else? It was a big deal to even hire me at that church. They were very traditional. Was I pushing the envelope too far? And if you've ever spent any part of your life on the outside, for whatever reason, if you've ever felt second class for any period of time, you know how it can mess with your head. We can start to question ourselves.

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We can start to question our right to have a life like everyone else, to be respected, to be included. And so we put up with more than we should. We learn to look the other way; we bite our tongue all the while hoping quietly that someone with more power might speak up.

On that day, unbeknownst to either of us, this fellow was married to a Canaanite mother of sorts. She had heard the whole thing, and while I don't know what kind of argument they had at home, it was about a week or so later when we got a call from them offering to host what would be the biggest, most beautiful baby shower that the church had ever thrown. Canaanite mothers are prophets in our very midst, sent by God not to predict the future, but to speak to the truths of today, and they persist. They refuse to be turned away, and in so doing, reveal the barriers we didn't know existed, while reminding the rest of us of our worth. The mother in our story today, she's no theologian. She's not wealthy or privileged. She is just a mother whose name we never learn, determined to save her daughter, and she will not take no for an answer. They are with us everywhere. They are the undocumented worker willing to risk taking her kids to the ER, a homeless father dropping his children off at school from the car they slept in that night; they're the kid at school who risks stepping in when someone is being bullied. They are the mother who leads her family out of the church of her childhood because they no longer welcomed hers.

Maybe this story is calling all of us to be such prophetic voices. To find new ways to speak up for the voiceless and to stand with the marginalized until the margins are no more. Maybe the story is about a divine dance, one that we're all invited to but can only begin once the insider and the outsider, once the privileged and the powerless can take one another's hand so they can chart a new course toward a new world. One where we might finally stop asking people to measure up, and instead invite us all to hold a mirror up and to see ourselves, and to see how my truth, and your truth, and a homeless person's truth, and a veteran's truth, and a trans person's truth, and a Republican's truth, and a Democrat's truth are all the same truth.

That truth is that you are each exactly what God had in mind when He made you. As I look back over these last seven years with you all, I wanna thank you for trusting me with your truth and helping me to see more of my own. Thank you for not just welcoming my family, but inviting us into yours. For all you in the Sunday school, thank you. Thank you for teaching my children the greatest lesson they could ever learn, that they are beloved as they are tomorrow, today, and forever. Thank you for losing the arguments we needed to lose so that we could widen the circle here as much as we have.

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Like our Canaanite mother, may you too never stop. May you never give up. May you always persist in extending that same welcome, that same compassion, that same community, that same grace to the next person and the next who come through those doors looking for a place to belong, whoever they are, wherever they find themselves on the journey of faith.

Amen.