

*Did you hear that???*

Did you hear what Jesus called that woman in today's gospel?  
The woman who was doing what most any of us would do –  
go to any length to get help for a sick child?

Sure, she was a woman – so against custom to address a man in public.  
She was Syrophoenician – so definitely not Jewish, but Gentile.  
And with such a sick child then, by association, considered unclean.  
But still. Jesus basically calls her a *DOG*?

That's not the Jesus I thought I signed up for.  
And this is definitely not the easiest passage to digest (or preach).  
Maybe you just heard it, did a double-take, and thought,  
"Well, hopefully Dee Anne will explain it."

I imagine there are sermons being preached right now trying to "explain it (away)".  
You could use the old it-was-inserted-by-an-overzealous-editor years after Jesus.  
You could say that maybe Jesus was just "testing" her.  
It's even been suggested that Jesus didn't really mean it –  
he didn't say "dog" but "puppy"!

Maybe I've preached such nonsense in years past. (I didn't dare check my sermon file.)  
But especially after all we've been through these long eighteen months,  
I couldn't settle for easy answers. And neither should you.  
Let's just take the story as it is, in context.

Yes, Jesus was tired and maybe "hangry";  
it says he'd been trying to slip away for some time apart.  
He was a Jewish man in Gentile territory and, well, "dog" was a slur sometimes used  
against Syrophoenicians.  
And, Jesus didn't say "no" to the woman, but "not yet" –  
more like "Stay in your lane, lady."

So what if Jesus did say what Mark says he said to that woman?  
What if Jesus did call her a "dog" in the heat of the moment?  
And...what if Jesus was moved by her quick rebuttal,  
her desperate situation, her love for another Child of God?  
It wouldn't be the first time.

We read in Mark's Gospel just a few weeks ago that Jesus was moved to compassion

for people who were “like sheep without a shepherd”.  
In John’s Gospel, Jesus is so “deeply moved in spirit” that he weeps  
for his friend Lazarus, and the sisters who mourn him.  
So why not here? Why not for *this* woman?

You know the saying “Actions speak louder than words.” And so they do.  
Look what action Jesus takes after hearing  
the Syrophoenician woman’s words.  
He literally starts practicing what she’s preached.  
He leaves the Syrophoenician region of Tyre and, it says,  
goes by way of Sidon into the region of Decapolis.  
Geographically, it doesn’t make much sense.

You may have heard me point out that, in Scripture, numbers often have  
a spiritual or theological significance more than numerical.  
We may not talk about it as much, but the same is largely true for geography.

When you go home, if you have a decent study bible, look at a map.  
You’ll see that Tyre (where Jesus encountered the Syrophoenician woman and  
healed her daughter) is here.  
Sidon is up here.  
And, Decapolis (where Jesus heals the deaf, mute man in today’s gospel) is *way* over here.  
The lopsided triangle of Tyre > Sidon > Decapolis.  
That’s not what you’d call a scenic route.

After hearing the Syrophoenician woman, and healing her daughter,  
Jesus goes deeper into Phoenicia, deeper into the woman’s territory,  
deeper into the foreign, the unknown.

Mark is the shortest of the gospels. He doesn’t generally include every little detail.  
But here he takes the time to describe Jesus’ circuitous journey.

We read every week that everywhere Jesus went he taught and healed.  
Even, eventually, the Syrophoenician woman and her daughter.  
Even in the thick of Gentile territory.  
And, yes, even on a roundabout route to Decapolis,  
another Gentile area (this one, mostly Greek) where he heals a deaf, mute man.

Jesus is literally rerouted by the words of a foreign woman’s fearsome love.  
He travels deeper into the fullness of the mission God sent him to embrace.  
And this expansive, love without condition, grace upon grace,  
boundary-busting practitioner of radical hospitality  
is exactly who we signed up to follow.

We too are going through a life-defining experience.

With what our bishops have called the “twin pandemics” of COVID and systemic racism, with the terrifying effects of our changing climate hitting closer and closer, with one “unprecedented” event after another piling up, surely we will not come out of all this the same as we went into it. We dare not try cling to the “good old days” which no longer exist (and may not have been all that good for everyone anyway).

May we have the grace and the guts to be molded and stretched, healed and changed, into who God would have us to be now. And in that we will *be more like Jesus*.

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