

A few years ago, my daughter, like millions of other pre-teen girls was enamored with a made for TV Disney movie called *High School Musical*. It was pretty syrupy. In fact, one critic said it was so sugary that it made "*Grease* look like *Rebel Without a Cause*."<sup>1</sup> But underneath the bubble-gum was a pretty serious message.

The story dealt with youth in the highly stratified world of a modern American high school. There were rigid role expectations. The jocks never associated with the braniacs who had nothing to do with the skater dudes, who had nothing to do with the artsy kids.

And yet, in the movie a basketball star boy and an ultra brainy girl both try to break out of the rigid expectations and roles that their peers have assigned to them. Both the jock and the braniac want to sing in their school's musical, and they both encounter huge resistance.

The message is that we pigeonhole people into neat little categories and expect them to behave accordingly. You are this. We expect you to behave this way. He's that. No wonder he thinks that way.

We all know that cliques in high school and middle school can have a very negative impact. Such social stratification was a partial factor in the Columbine massacre. But it goes beyond middle schools and high schools. We adults have plenty of stereotypes and expectations of who people are and how they will behave based on ethnicity, and religion, and nationality, and income. And then we divide ourselves along these lines, and take shots, either figuratively or literally across the divide.

He's black. She's a liberal. He's gay. She's a fundamentalist. They're Jews. They're Muslims. They're all a bunch of decadent imperialist oppressors. They're all a bunch of radical terrorists. And on and on and on.

Which brings us to today's Gospel lesson Mk ch7. In Mk7, Jesus makes one of his few trips outside of his own country. Jesus leaves Israel travels to the region of Tyre in what is now southern Lebanon.

In Jesus' day, the Jews in Israel had a deep dislike for the inhabitants of Tyre, and vice versa. It saddens me that the same problem still exists. In our time this area has often been a flashpoint for terrorism and retaliation. In our day, as in Jesus day, there is great division between what we now call Lebanon and Israel.

So let's look at Jesus' visit to Tyre, Jesus in gentile territory. What does he do in such a situation?

v24 Jesus goes to Tyre. "He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice." It appears that Jesus is leaving Israel so that he can lie low. Things are heating up, and it's not yet time for the Passion. So he and his disciples are hiding out.

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<sup>1</sup> Newsweek July 24, 2006

v25 “But a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. 26 Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.”

And then, Jesus says something in v27 that seems incredibly harsh. It seems out of character. Because of that, there is an enormous amount of controversy around v27. Jesus says to the woman, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

It’s actually a very harsh statement. The meaning of the statement itself is crystal clear. Why Jesus says it is controversial. But the meaning of what he says is undisputed. “Let the children be fed first.” It very clearly means that ‘my primary ministry is to the children of Israel, to the Jewish people. They come first.’ “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

Does Jesus compare this woman to a dog? Yes he does. And it’s even harsher in his culture than in our culture. In our culture, it’s insulting to call a woman a dog. And many of us like dogs. Many of us have dogs as pets.

But it was even a bigger insult in Jesus’ day, because the Jews despised dogs. The Greeks and Romans kept dogs as household pets, but good Jews didn’t. The Jews regarded dogs as unclean, as scavengers. And Jews would often insultingly refer to gentiles as dogs.

So why would Jesus compare this woman to a dog? There are several theories out there.

Theory 1: Jesus is a human being and a product of his culture. And maybe he’s just having a bad-hair day and is on edge. After all, he’s trying to rest and hide out, and this pesky woman is interrupting. Maybe he just lashes out. That’s possible, though unlikely from the context.

Theory 2: Mark actually uses a diminutive form of the Greek word for “dog.” It could also be translated as doggie or puppy. This argument says, “Other people would call her a dog. Jesus softens this and calls her a “little bitty doggie.” I would find this argument more convincing if Mark’s Greek grammar wasn’t so bad in other places.

Theory 3: Jesus uses derogatory language to embarrass his own disciples. Jesus is using the same kind of language they would use. He’s verbalizing what they’re thinking. He’s using it for shock value, to make his disciples realize that their prejudices are wrong. Maybe they’ll hear how bad it sounds and clean up their own act. That could be a part of what’s going on here.

Theory 4: Jesus is testing the woman. He’s giving her a little verbal push away to see if she’ll keep coming. In fact, that was something rabbis were told to do with gentiles who came to them. Rebuff them a little bit, and if they persist, you’ll know they’re sincere. This is probably the best explanation because that’s exactly what happens with this woman and Jesus.

Jesus gives a little push. But the woman keeps coming. She is tenacious. And it turns out, she’s also very clever and witty. v28: “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” That’s a great comeback. ‘If I’m a gentile dog, fine, don’t feed me. All I need is a tiny crumb from you.’ And she gets what she wants.

v29 Jesus says, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.” In Matthew Jesus adds, “Woman, great is your faith!” The daughter of the gentile woman is completely healed. And then right after that, in the next scene, Jesus heals another gentile, a man who is deaf and mute.

Jesus says, “Let the children be fed first.” Yet he heals these two gentiles. His words may be hard to understand. But his actions are clear. Jesus heals these gentile people. In his earthly life, Jesus certainly doesn’t intend for foreigners to be the focus of his ministry. He has enough work to do just in Israel. After all, in a few short months he must go to die. And he goes to die in Jerusalem, not Athens or Rome. Israel is where his most important work will be done.

Jesus’ work in Israel is certainly phase 1 of the Christian movement. But there is also a phase 2. After his resurrection, Jesus tells his disciples to take the gospel out to all the peoples of the world. Jesus makes explicit what is hinted at in Mark 7. No one is beyond God’s embrace. The Good News is for all people, regardless of our human categories. God’s love is for everyone.

We have our categories our stereotypes and our divisions along racial, ethnic, and economic lines. But the Kingdom of God transcends all of these human categories. The Good News, the love of God in Jesus Christ, is for all the people of the earth.

We live in an era of terrorism, of prejudice, of ethnic cleansing, of war and strife, of countless categories that divide us. In the midst of that reality, let us hold fast to a greater reality. As Christians, we are citizens of this world. But we are also citizens of the Kingdom of God. That Kingdom is made up of people from all tribes, and languages, and ethnicities, and nations. Let us live remembering who we are, and who our brothers and sisters truly are. May God’s Kingdom come, on Earth, **as** it is in Heaven.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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