

In our Gospel we just heard about healings of two people. One the daughter of a Syrophenician woman in the region of Tyre. The other a man from the Decapolis.

Tyre? Decapolis? Sounds like biblical gobbledygook that goes in one ear and out the other.

But Mark's original audience would have perked up. Tyre? What is Jesus doing in Tyre? Tyre is by the Mediterranean, northwest of Galilee. It's actually foreign territory. It's not Jewish. Wasn't Jewish then. Isn't Jewish now. Today it's 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 problems still exist. 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.

And the Decapolis? What is Jesus doing there? That's east of Galilee, on the eastern shore of the sea of Galilee. Today we call the bulk of that area the Golan Heights. Syria claims this territory as its own. But since the Six Day War in 1967, Israel has been controlling it. When I visited this area in the 90's, there were still burnt out, rusted tanks sitting 15 or 20 yards from the side of the road, sitting there since 1967. Like Lebanon, Syria is also a flashpoint and a very troubled area.

So in both cases, Jesus is outside of Jewish territory. He's in Gentile areas. Why?

Mark tells us today that Jesus went to Tyre and "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 Jesus and his disciples are hiding out.

But a woman comes up to him. She wants Jesus to cast an unclean spirit out of her daughter. She comes up to Jesus and bows at his feet—a sign of total respect and submission. She begs him to cast out that unclean spirit.

But then Mark adds the little fact that this woman is a Gentile, she is Syrophenician. She's a pagan. And yet she comes to Jesus.

And then, Jesus says something that seems incredibly harsh. It seems out of character. Because of that, there is an enormous amount of controversy around his statement. 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 Jesus is 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 with a sexist and racist slur. 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. I believe that's part of what's going on here. But I also think there's something more.

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.

I think this is what's going on here. I believe theory 4, it's a test of this woman. I also think that it's also theory 3. It's a test of the disciples. So this is a double test if you will. The disciples don't do so well. But the woman passes her test.

Jesus gives a little push. But the woman keeps coming. She is tenacious. And it turns out, she's also very clever and witty. She says, "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 don't forget the cultural division. Jews view dogs as scavengers. Pagans keep them as pets. So the woman is also saying, 'Don't treat me like some scavenging mongrel. Treat me like the pet at the children's table. Give me a little crumb.' And she gets what she wants.

Jesus says, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." And in Matthew Jesus adds, "Woman, great is your faith!" The daughter of this gentile woman is completely healed.

And then Jesus goes to the Decapolis. From a geographical standpoint, going from Galilee to Tyre is like going from Lubbock to Clovis. And then to go from Tyre to the Decapolis is like going from Clovis to Wichita Falls. It's a weird itinerary bouncing around like that. But if Jesus is trying to lay low, and trying to avoid Galilee it makes a little more sense.

So we've got Jesus in the Decapolis, Jesus in a Gentile area part II. And there, Jesus encounters a deaf man with a speech impediment.

There's no hesitation with Jesus healing this Gentile man. Which is another reason to think the push-back on the Syrophoenician woman was a test. Jesus takes the man aside. He touches his ears. He touches his tongue. And Mark mentions that Jesus spits. It's a bit unclear if Jesus uses his own saliva in the healing itself or if Jesus spits on the ground. I suspect he was using it as part of the healing. OK, that may seem gross. But the man is deaf. He can't hear anything Jesus says. So Jesus is communicating in a way the man can understand. Jesus touches the man's ears. Jesus touches the man's tongue. Jesus does something with saliva. And then Jesus commands, "Ephphatha." Literally, "Be opened."

And the man could hear clearly. And the man could speak clearly. The man may be a Gentile. But Jesus heals him nonetheless. Jesus' primary mission may have been to the lost sheep of the Jewish people. But he heals the Syrophoenician woman's daughter, and he heals the deaf man of the Decapolis.

Yes, 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 message of God's love 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 and 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.

Yes, we live in a world of terrorism, of prejudice, of ethnic cleansing, of war and strife, of countless categories that divide us. But 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 peoples, and nations. Let us live remembering who we are, and who our brothers and sisters truly are. And may God's Kingdom come, on Earth, **as** it is in Heaven.