

Years ago when I was teaching church school using the Godly Play curriculum that we now use in Kinder Care the parents complained that their children were tired of hearing the same stories over and over again. Mind you, the stories that they were hearing were taken from scripture! If you've been coming to church for any period of time you too have been hearing the same stories over and over again. Can you imagine the complaints if we were to read anything but the gospel according to Luke on Christmas Eve? Needless to say, the rector and I rolled our eyes. And frankly, if you have been hearing these stories in the same way over and over again, well you've not been paying attention. When we really listen, when we open our hearts to the hard stuff, the ambiguity, the downright confusing and sometimes disturbing stories of scripture, we will hear something different because scripture will speak to us based on where we are in our lives. This means that we never hear those stories the same way twice. And the first part of today's gospel is a prime example.

Jesus is wandering around Tyre, a Gentile city, and has sought refuge away from the crowds. His reputation has preceded him and he gets no peace from the people who have heard about his great deeds. A gentile woman comes and asks him to cure her daughter of a demon. Jesus responds to the woman's request by calling her a dog and refusing to help her.

Was Jesus hangry – that state you get in when your blood sugar has plummeted, or had he been on his feet too long, did he just want a moment's peace, or even a nap? We can cut him some slack since he's been interrupted by someone not of his own people, someone who probably belongs to the wealthy class of gentiles who has been exploiting the Jewish peasants of Galilee, and his mission was to the children of Israel.

But is this what we expect of Jesus? Gentle Jesus, meek, and mild? Really?

So how did you hear this story today? I am sure that you have heard many a sermon saying that Jesus changed his mind. Jesus wasn't really calling the woman a dog but a puppy. Or that Jesus was trying to teach his disciples a lesson. All of them could be right or none of them could be right. No matter how you interpret this story it depends on how you understand Jesus – and how you might be feeling about God or Jesus in that particular moment. Do you wish to find excuses for his behavior or do you see Jesus as a stern judge, oh, and how do you think he understood his identity as the Son of God? Did he understand the scope of his mission; did he know where it would lead? Was he aware that he was both man and God?

There are lots of ways to look at this story.

Yes, we know that Jesus was kind and compassionate. He fed 5,000 hungry people, he wanted the little children to come to him, and he healed many people, the blind, the lame, the deaf, and the mute as we hear in our reading from Isaiah, all signs of the kingdom of God come near. There's that lovely story in the gospel of John when Jesus sees the widow weeping behind her dead son's bier and knowing she will have no one to care for her Jesus brings him back from the dead. In it also seems that the next person he healed, as told in the second half of our gospel lesson, was also a gentile, having done it once he had no problem doing it again.

But Jesus also told the rich young man that he had to sell all of his belongings in order to follow him, he dissed his mother and his brothers and his sisters when they tried to protect him from the crowd. In the gospel of Matthew he condemned to hell those wedding guests who did

not wear proper attire, and those foolish bridesmaids who having run out of oil, were locked out of the wedding feast, Then there's the parable of the wicked master who goes away leaving his servants with money to invest and the one that was too scared and doesn't invest in anything is cast into the outer darkness for some weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Obviously Jesus has no problem drawing the line when he wants to. So Jesus says no to the Syrophenician woman. He doesn't say no actually he says that the children should be fed first, it's not fair to take it from them and throw it to the dogs. Although the woman pushes back she accepts her place as a dog and then reminds Jesus that even dogs have a place at the table.

On one level perhaps Jesus was saying that his mission was not to the gentiles, at least not yet, it was first to the Jews. Many of the prophets had expected that at the coming of God's reign all would be welcome at the banquet, even the gentiles – but that they would have a lesser place, not separate but certainly not equal.

As Christians we know Jesus to be the Son of God. In the Nicene creed we affirm that he is the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, of one being with the Father and that he was made man through the Virgin Mary, that Christ is now in heaven, seated at the right hand of the Father. We say all these things that were carefully written to combat a variety of heresies that were prevalent in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. We understand that Jesus Christ is both fully human and fully divine even if how this works is a mystery. And yet that is what the sum of scripture tells us. When however we read the stories about Jesus we can wonder what did Jesus really know about himself? Clearly he knew that he had a unique relationship with the Father but did he also see himself as God? And if he did why would God say no to a woman who was begging for help? It's easy to understand from a human perspective but for an omnipotent God to say no?

But the story doesn't end there. Pushing back on God is not without precedent. Moses does it when God first taps him to lead the Hebrews out of Egypt and tells him to go talk to pharaoh. In Exodus 4 Moses whines and says "I am slow of speech and slow of tongue" please send someone else. God gets a little pissy and then realizes that he's not going to get any further with Moses so he relents and says ok then get your brother Aaron, he can do it. You know I love the story of Abraham in Genesis 18 when Abraham argues with God over whether or not God will destroy the people of Sodom and Gomorrah because they have been abusing the poor. Eventually Abraham convinces God that if there are 10 righteous men God will not destroy it.

There are fewer stories about people arguing with Jesus and getting away with it, in John's gospel we have the wedding at Cana where Mary urges Jesus to do something about the lack of wine and Jesus responds that it is not his time and then changes the water into wine like a good son. But Jesus also tells us that persistence pays off, even when the first answer is no. There's the story in Luke 18 that Jesus he tells about the unjust judge who had no fear of God and no respect for people but there was this widow who kept coming to him for justice who was driving him crazy and in the end the judge relents in order to get rid of her.

So what do you think? Why did Jesus refuse to heal the Syrophenician woman's daughter?

And in the end does it really matter? Regardless of whether or not Jesus knew himself to be the Son of God, regardless of whether or not he was having a cranky moment, a racist moment, or a "the mission must not be diverted" moment Jesus relents and heals the woman's daughter. And today we are the gentiles eating the children's crumbs.

Scripture, it's never the same way twice.

Amen.