

Today's gospel is a tricky one.

Jesus has continued his mission of preaching, teaching, healing, and casting out demons. He finds himself in Tyre, a gentile region, and seeks refuge in a house where he hopes no one will come to him. (Mark2:24)

We've all been there, haven't we? There have been one too many "why" questions from your 4 year old, your subordinate keeps asking for permission when what they want to do is well within the scope of their authority, your co-worker asks you the same question for the zillionth time, your partner asks you to do something the minute you get home from work, and your friend hits you up for another "loan." Our resources are exhausted and we long for rest.

So did Jesus, but Jesus' power is such that it cannot be hidden and so a Syrophenician woman tracks him down and asks him to cast the demon out of her daughter. Is this interruption of his rest the straw that broke the camel's back?

We would have expected Jesus to accede to her request. Instead, he responds with the harshest language he has ever used: he tells her that he was sent to the children of Israel and that it would not be fair to feed the dogs first. (Mark7:27)

What is up with that?

He has probably healed gentiles before so why was his response so negative and derogatory? Was he just cranky?

Probably not. Mark isn't much one for psychological depth and the way he tells his stories is terse, without embellishment, so the better question is "what is he telling his audience in his depiction of the uncomfortable interaction".

Scholars and theologians disagree and some of that disagreement has to do with how they interpret the context of life in and around 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine. For example, Galilee was agricultural, and Jewish, its peasants were not well off. By contrast, Tyre was a wealthy city full of gentiles who took advantage of their poorer neighbors. Perhaps the woman appeared to be wealthy, and Jesus is trying to take her down a notch because she presumed that she could take one more thing away from her Jewish neighbors.

On the other hand, Jesus didn't say that the dogs would not be fed but that the children [of Israel] should be fed first. Was Jesus simply not ready to demonstrate how his ministry would extend beyond the bounds of Judaism? His response reminds me of the scene in the Marriage at Cana in John's gospel when his mother asks him to do something about the lack of wine and he say "how is that my problem? It's not the right time.?" (John2:3)

Perhaps then, Jesus was trying to test the Syrophenician woman, to see if she had enough faith or resolve to push back – which she did when she responded "even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs". (Mark 7:27)

Some interpreters get their knickers in a twist when people speculate that Jesus had to have his conscience awakened to the fullness of his ministry by a gentile. Such an interpretation would mean that Jesus did not fully understand his mission, or that he had just sinned by being rude and refusing to help someone.

Others speculate that he was testing his disciples to see if they understood the need to extend his ministry beyond the bounds of Judaism.

And so on.

Whatever the rationale behind for Jesus's response, or for Mark's inclusion of the episode in his gospel, the bottom line is that Jesus denied the woman. The woman pushed back, and Jesus approved her response and cast the demon out of her daughter.

One possible take-a way is the importance of responding with the assistance that is in our capacity to give when we are approached by someone in need. The other readings for today also support this conclusion that should come as no surprise since it is a consistent theme throughout scripture, particularly in the words of the prophets.

Proverbs states that God expects us to be generous to the poor, not to take advantage of them, look down on them, or make their lives any more difficult than they are already. (Proverbs 22:8-9, 22-23) Furthermore, the poor are under God's protection and those that deny them will be judged.

The Epistle from James is equally direct. He is chastising the congregation for their treatment of the poor and reminds them that God has chosen the poor to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom. (James 2:5) The poor, and we can interpret "poor" as shorthand for those who are vulnerable, the sick, the widowed, the orphans, those in prison, the foreigner, the outcast, etc. In addition, James tackles the persistent and regrettable inclination to blame the poor for conditions that are affecting or oppressing society as a whole. (James 2:6) There is a meme floating around the internet that says something like "Don't blame the immigrants for taking your jobs, blame the corporations who have moved their operations overseas to take advantage of cheap labor". It's not the poor who oppress you but the rich, those who have the power to structure laws and conditions to suit themselves, and not the needs of the majority.

The Syrophenician woman was probably not poor, at least in a material sense but her daughter was in need. Her daughter was in need of help that only Jesus could provide.

Where are we in the situation to provide help to those in need, where are we the only recourse when someone's situation is desperate?

Think about the images you saw in the news of the people trying to leave Kabul, the danger faced by those who assisted the U.S. through the war. Those who made it out will need our compassion and our assistance as they are integrated into our society and we must continue to assist those who have not yet left.

Think about the people of Haiti, their country ravaged by yet another hurricane. In fact we don't have to look that far, all those who have been affected in this country by hurricane Ida.

Think about those seeking asylum from Latin America. They are fleeing violence and poverty, they are willing to risk their lives and the lives of their children to enter a land of hope, of opportunity.

The list goes on. Although most of us are not in a position to assist directly we can work to influence our government at national as well as local level.

But that is not all. If we believe what scripture tells us, if we profess to have faith in the God who created, redeemed, and sustains us, and who has given us the hope of eternal life, then we are required as a society and as individuals to respond when asked for assistance. Please give and give generously when asked for assistance.

James minces no words in the closing verse of our reading. *What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. {James 2:14-17}*

Amen