Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23

James 2:1-10, 11-13, 14-17

Mark 7:24-37

Last Sunday, our first reading was from the Song of Songs – the small book of erotic love poetry that makes teenagers giggle in church. It gets them interested in the Bible, with such verses as “Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away with me.” This language is quite a departure from the rest of the Bible.

This week we get another departure. We get Jesus refusing a direct request to heal someone. This is the one and only time this happens in the gospels.[[1]](#footnote-1)

To make matters worse, this is the one and only time we see Jesus level an insult at someone who has asked for his help. He calls her a dog. And he does so in the plural: he used the word *dogs*. Jesus intends this insult for both the woman seeking his help and her sick child. “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Plural.

There was a time in the Church when this text was glossed over. Commentators said, “Well he didn’t really call this woman a dog. The word can be translated *little dog*. A puppy.” They claimed that with a twinkle in his eye Jesus – knowing all along that he was going to help the woman – used a cute little diminutive, or nick-name, in speaking to her.

That’s hogwash. I don’t believe it for a second. When I was a kid my dad had his own terms of endearment for me. He liked to call me his *peanut*. He never called me a little dog.

The woman who approached Jesus that day was a Gentile. She had come modestly: not with a sense of entitlement. She wasn’t well-placed in society; not powerful, not wealthy. She came because she was desperate for her child. Jesus responded by denying her even the modest dignity she possessed. And he uttered a racial slur.

It just isn’t honest to gloss over such things anymore. The term “dog” was what Jews commonly called Gentiles. We know this is the case because the woman recognizes the slur. She affirms it when she replies, “Even the dogs – or rather, even *we* dogs – eat the crumbs under the table.”

If we allow this story its full impact – after all, it is preserved in sacred text and it was written in its own time of ethnic tension – then it has something searing to tell us. We don’t need to gloss over it with false sentimentality.

It tells the searing, shameful truth of racial hatred. We have learned in our age that power, or privilege, plus prejudice equals racism. What we are learning in a pluralistic, globalized world is that some things are systemic. Racism is systemic and it is a sin.

But! If this story tells the searing, shameful truth of racial hatred, it also provides a way out. It teaches us that even the best of humanity – the Incarnation himself – can get caught up in systems of oppression. It also demonstrates how those systems can be conquered. Jesus shows us how.

He was brought up in a prejudiced world.[[2]](#footnote-2) He was conditioned by a certain worldview. So are we all. It’s the water we swim in. But it doesn’t alone make one a racist. How we respond to those who are different reveals who we truly are. “Do we dismiss them as *dogs*? Do we ignore the systemic realities of oppression? Or do we, like Jesus, do the miraculous and listen. Do we risk being changed by a truth that we may not know?”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Jesus took that risk. In the moment of hearing and finally feeling this woman’s pain, Jesus changes. He changes his mind and declares that the child is healed. More than that: he changes his mission. Because in the very next part of the passage, he goes deeper into Gentile territory. There he heals a deaf man. A deaf Gentile man. And right after that he feeds 4000. That would be 4000 Gentiles. What a striking mirror-image that is to the feeding of the five thousand, who were Jews.

He has repeatedly said, “I have come to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” And here he is deep in Gentile territory. Here he is healing one Gentile after another. Healing and feeding.

What we have in this passage – at this particular moment in the life of Jesus – is his humanity in full view. We just can’t say that he never made a mistake. I know we have been taught this, right? Jesus was perfect! Do bear in mind we Christians hold that Jesus was uniquely human and divine at the same time. And humans make mistakes.

Admitting that Jesus made a mistake gives us great hope. Jesus is not a super-hero in Spandex. He is not a model-of-perfection who bears no likeness to us mere mortals. We want him to be the simple, magic answer to all our problems and to all of society’s problems. I believe he is ultimately the answer to all our problems but I don’t believe any of that is simple, or easy, or magical. Look at how he struggled in this story. Nothing is simple or easy.

As the story opens, Jesus is tired. He has been pummeled right and left by contentious religious authorities and he needs a break. He goes into Gentile territory probably to get away from the Jews. For all his fatigue; for all his occupational weariness; he was nevertheless able to hear at a deep level what the woman had to say after initially rebuffing her. When she said even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs, she was saying: “I know the people of Israel are the children at the table. But I also know the mercy of God extends even to me.”

In the quiet of his heart and the fatigue of his body Jesus said, “You’re right!” “You’re right and I am wrong.” The mercy of God extends beyond the religious boundaries and close-mindedness that Jesus himself was wrestling with. He allowed this woman to open up his own thinking. His vision; his mission expanded because he was able to change his viewpoint.

This woman, who isn’t even named in scripture, had a profound effect on Jesus. She didn’t leave after his brush-off. She was persistent. Are we? Do we persevere in prayer for the Kingdom of God? Jesus said, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.” What he didn’t say is that if you want righteousness for yourself and for the world, you will suffer.

You will suffer when, like Jesus, you open your ears and mind and heart to truly understand the other. Because then you will feel that one’s pain. You will suffer with. That’s the literal meaning of “compassion” – to suffer with.

You are blessed when you ache for righteousness. And you will suffer, just like Jesus. It is in the suffering of Jesus that we see his divine perfection. At any point along the way he could have caved. Even at the hour of his crucifixion. Pilate begged him to cave. “I can find no wrong in this man,” he told the murderous crowd. If Jesus had only backed away from all that he stood for; if he had only renounced his own hunger and thirst for God’s Kingdom on earth, he could have retired to a quiet life.

If we chose the path of least resistance; the quiet life of I-don’t want-to-get-involved, then we insulate ourselves. We encase ourselves in a cocoon so impermeable that even God can’t get in.

But that’s not who we are. That’s not who you are. Because you’re here, on a Sunday morning, when the prejudice of our society increasingly says, “Don’t bother with church.” You are here. That’s an important part of perseverance. By persevering with Jesus; with one another; with our Episcopal way of life: good things can happen. Our lives can count for goodness.

Amen.

1. Matt Skinner, “Commentary on Mark 7:24-37,” [www.textweek.com](http://www.textweek.com) for September 6, 2015.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. David Henson in *Patheos* (9/2/2015), quoted in Synthesis, a sermons-help publication, of September 9, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)