

Grace and peace to you from God Our Father and from the One who is both the immortal, unchangeable God and the very human Savior of the world, Jesus Christ Our Lord, amen.

I hardly know what to make of the scene we witness in Mark's Gospel today. I know the woman Jesus meets in our Gospel lesson today. I know her because I've been her. I've been her when I prayed so hard for my own child, when I bantered with Jesus over my own situations, both at work and with my relationships with others in my Church family. You know her, too... This one who would travel any distance, cross over any barriers, risk any social shame to save the life of a beloved child, sibling, parent, friend. Maybe you've been her too... We know her well and recognize her deep-deep struggle. It's no wonder we're troubled by Jesus' first response. "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

I've read all the commentaries and not a one seems able to adequately explain or 'explain away' Jesus' seeming effort to dehumanize this woman and her child by comparing their suffering to a 'dog...' In the NRSV translation it doesn't show, but the Greek word does soften the insult a little. The word we have as 'dog' should really be translated as 'little dog' or maybe 'puppy dog.' Even so, that doesn't help much...

Some suggest Jesus was just tired. Perhaps his retreat into the region of Tyre was meant to be just that: a retreat from the constant pressure bearing down on him from countless needy, suffering people and those with earthly authority who would seek to stand in the way of what and who he was called to be and do. Maybe Jesus' weariness is what we hear in his instinctively negative response. Or maybe Mark put this story in his book to show us in no uncertain terms just how human Jesus really was. Jesus was every bit as much actual flesh and blood and bone as he was divine. As for me, there is no piece of scripture that brings this across more clearly than this one.

Yes, Jesus was both human and divine, but I don't buy that being the sole reason for Mark to include a story making Jesus into someone I don't much care for... If all he wanted to show us was Jesus human side, he could have told a story about Jesus being sick or having a case of acne as a teenager. There are many other ways Mark could have shown Jesus' human nature without showing him as a person prejudiced against women and foreigners.

If we can put the whole 'dog' slur aside for a moment and step back to look at this story from a larger perspective, we might gain some insight into what's really going on here. One of my seminary professors once told a story about when he was a parish pastor. A woman came to him extremely distraught and in tears. She had just caught her husband cheating on her with another woman. He did his

best to pastor her and pray with her and calmed her down. In the course of their conversation the woman admitted she had met her husband and began seeing him in a romantic way while he was still married to his first wife. Now he didn't point this out to her, but he wondered to himself, how she could expect anything different from him this time around. His behavior had already been established with her from the beginning of their relationship.

My professor then compared this marriage situation with the covenant God made, first with the Hebrew people and then later, through Jesus Christ with the entire human population. God made a covenant promise to the Hebrew people they would be His Chosen people and He would be their God. Through Jesus, God was now offering another promise to another people. God cannot and will not abandon the people of His first covenant promise any more than He would abandon the people of the new covenant. That is why Jesus insisted the 'Children' must be fed first. Let's suppose God didn't send Jesus and then later, the Apostles first to the 'lost Children of the house of Israel', but instead said, "you Hebrew people have sinned and strayed too far from me. Be cursed and I will now gather my children from among the Gentiles instead." Not only would this mean God has abandoned His first promise, but how could the people of the new covenant ever really trust in a God who has already abandoned His 'Chosen' people before. What assurance would we have as the children of that new covenant God wouldn't

get tired of us and declare us to be too sinful and too far from His love to be redeemable? No, the God we worship and adore is a God we can trust because God doesn't ever give up on His people. Does Jesus put this woman and her little sick daughter down? Well, certainly by our PC standards He seems to, but the much more important point here is this new covenant has to be offered first to the remnants of God's original chosen people and then to everyone else. It's a matter of God keeping His promise to His first people and it's a matter of trust for us.

Having said all that, sometimes stories have multiple truths and multiple meanings. So, I offer one more very important possibility. In addition to all the stuff I already said this story is a powerful reminder to us that Jesus — and therefore God — is not static. Jesus was shaped and influenced by real forces all around him, born into and living in a particular time and place with all that meant. In the Gospels, especially in Mark's Gospel, we actually bear witness to the story of one who was a 'work in progress' and we're privileged to see his growing into the one who would lay down his life, not just for those who came from the same place he did, not just for the first children of God, but for all the rest of us as well.

It might be troubling to wrap your mind around a Savior of the world who has to grow into the shoes before he can walk in them, but that is what we see in today's text. As I watched a bit of the hearings for the Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh play out this week, I heard him being questioned over and over

again about his understanding of precedent in judging the law. It made me think there is certainly evidence elsewhere, precedent, if you will, for this understanding of who and how God is--a God who can be changed and grow... We can travel back to the time when Abraham walked with God and argued that Sodom be spared God's wrath. You remember the story... Abraham bargains God down from 100 righteous men to just ten. If I find ten righteous people in Sodom will you destroy the whole city? God relents and says okay if we can find ten righteous people, I'll spare the whole city. If God was open to that sort of conversation which would change God's mind then... why wouldn't this still be so now?

[\(Genesis 18:16-33\)](#)

Oh, maybe it's not comfortable for us, this understanding of the Son of God somehow being changeable while he walked among us and yet, I can't think of a more reasonable way to hear what is before us now and I absolutely love the implication of what it means for us today. If Jesus' mind could in fact be swayed; if the entire plan of God could be moved by the banter of one desperate woman with a sick child, then maybe, just maybe, God's mind and heart can still be changed by me and my desperate frantic prayers. Maybe the entire plan God has in store for the human race can be changed when you go before Him with your desperate prayer. Maybe our entire relationship with Jesus is meant to be one of both give and take, an ongoing banter where we refuse to give up until we receive

the blessing we are so desperate to receive. It might not be the most comforting understanding of God, but our ancient understanding is when God made us in God's own image we were made to be God's partner in the Holy work of caring for God's whole creation. If we are, in fact partners with God in this Holy endeavor, wouldn't one partner have influence on the other? Might that just go both ways? Oh, it might be more comfortable to believe God is unchangeable and in many ways God *does* remain the same. God is ever and always One of love and grace, of forgiveness and hope. God never changes from being faithful to the covenant promises He has made, but God can be changed and is always changed in favor of love for the least and lost, even one so lost as me or you.

May stories like this one today open our eyes to the complex unimaginable nature of the God who created you in His own image, who gave you free will, and yet loves you enough to never allow you to get so far beyond His reach to save you. May this woman from today's Gospel provide us a new encouragement for our own prayers, inspiring us to banter with Jesus and maybe, just maybe change His mind for the sake of his love for you. Thanks be to God for His unchangeable faithfulness and for His openness to our desperate helplessness. Amen.