

Mark 7: 24-30  
Downtown Lenten Series  
Tallahassee, Florida

## From the Bottom Up

Being a lectionary preacher, I have visited this story from Mark's Gospel many times. As a young preacher, I did my best to pull its fangs by making Jesus out to be more diplomatic to this poor woman than the text indicates.

I even followed Willie Barclay's cheery suggestion that Jesus isn't really being rude or racist to this woman; he's being playful. He doesn't really imply that this woman and her sick child are dogs. The Greek word used here can also mean "puppy," Dr. Barclay suggests.

**"Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the *puppies*."**

No, I don't think so. We have to take the text as Mark offers it. Jesus is in foreign territory – way up north in the region of Tyre, which was part of Syria. He's there, it seems, to get away from his fellow Jews for a little vacation. He has found a nice bed and breakfast where nobody knows him, and he wants to keep it that way.

Given what Jesus will be facing when he goes back to Galilee and on to Jerusalem, we can hardly blame him, can we? Picture Jesus in an Hawaiian shirt and a pair of Foster Grants, keeping as low a profile as he possibly can.

Then this Syrophenician woman, this pesky *goy*, gets wind of where Jesus is staying, and begs him to heal her daughter, who has an unclean spirit. He can't get away, even for a day or two, even in Gentile territory.

*No, he tells her. I have to feed the children. It's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.* (If that's not an insult, I'm John Wesley.)

Quick as a flash, this woman fires back, **“Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”**

Do you think it’s blasphemous of me to suggest that Jesus might have blushed at that moment? Here is a Gentile, a foreigner, and a woman to boot, getting the better of him in a joust of words. More than that, she’s showing him that there is more to his ministry than even he knows.

This is one of the best comebacks in all of scripture, and if you ask me, it’s also a key to understanding the whole message of the gospel. In Mark especially, Jesus is the gospel and the gospel is Jesus, and here is Jesus learning that his mission is more than a matter of feeding only the children of Israel.

This kingdom Jesus is bringing in crosses the border, reaches beyond the Old Covenant, shatters the notion that God cares only for God’s Chosen People. In Jesus, the promise to Abraham that established the Covenant in the first place is being fleshed out -- the promise that through Abraham and his descendants all the nations will be blessed.

Jesus has come not merely for the “in group,” but also for those on the margins. Maybe especially for those on the margins – people like this uppity foreigner, who seems not to know her place. People like the 11 million undocumented neighbors of ours who live in fear of deportation. People like the 24 million neighbors who almost lost their health insurance a few days ago.

The problem with American Christianity right now is that too many of us insist on reading the Bible from the top down – the same way we insist on living in the world. The thing we fail to realize is that the Bible is written from the bottom up -- from the perspective of the dogs beneath the table.

Jesus has come to bring good news to them – to the deaf, the blind, lame, the poor. He says as much in Luke’s Gospel when he preaches to the hometown crowd in Nazareth, and here in Mark’s Gospel is this Gentile woman insisting that Jesus practice what he has preaching.

We all know that Jesus did just that – practiced what he preached. Doing that cost him his life on the cross. The time has more than come for you and me to do the same – to practice what Jesus preached.

In this moment, under this President, the Church of Jesus Christ is facing an existential decision. Shall we be the church from the top down, or the church from the bottom up?

Shall the poor, the lame, the disenfranchised, the immigrant in our gates, the victims of global climate change, the people whom the world treats like dogs, be our priority? Or will we turn inward, circling the wagons, demonizing those outside the tribe, chanting the new national liturgy: America first, America first, America first?

Brothers and sisters in Christ, the world – indeed the Lord – demands our answer, and nothing speaks louder than our silence.