

You work hard, the people you're trying to help are demanding, you power through pain and disappointments, you deal with criticism and all sorts of grief, and finally, you realize you need a vacation. And you actually get away! But just as you're settling in where you think no one will bother you, what happens? Someone who isn't even part of your community barges in and demands that you do something for them. Wouldn't you be a little testy?

We're in Chapter 7 of Mark's Gospel, so Jesus had been in public ministry for a while now. People swarm him to be healed. He's rejected in his hometown. His cousin John the Baptist is arrested and killed. His own disciples witness one miracle after another and still do not believe. The powers that be antagonize him. So Jesus went away, apparently by himself. Tyre is on the Mediterranean coast, with 300 days of sun a year and a yearly average temperature of 70 degrees. Can't say I blame him. Of course, it was Gentile territory, but maybe that was part of the appeal, since his ministry was primarily to his fellow Jews. It must have seemed like the perfect place to get away from it all.

But as we know, "it all" has a way of finding us. A woman "immediately heard about him," and came to him in a state of emotional intensity. I don't blame her; her daughter was suffering terribly and she was being a fierce advocate for her. But I can't blame Jesus either, not entirely, for snapping at her.

The Church teaches that Jesus was fully divine and fully human, at least, we say this and move on. We don't really go into detail about what Jesus being fully human might look like, except perhaps on Good Friday. But, well, here he is. And he doesn't have the disciples around to make him look good.

Jesus doesn't just brush off a woman in desperate need of

help, he calls her a dog, a common insult for a Jew to call a Gentile at the time. Jesus doesn't always say or do things we like. If we don't accept this, then we aren't accepting Jesus as a being distinct from ourselves. He is lord, savior, love, and hope, but he is not an agent of wish-fulfillment. He is fully human, but he is not merely a reflection of our preferences and aspirations.

Some well-meaning people have tried to argue that it wasn't as bad a thing to say as it sounds. It was playful! He was testing her faith! He's using a form of literary irony, like when the angels who visited Lot said they would go sleep in the street, it meant they expected him to show them hospitality! I suppose none of those are impossible. But still, Jesus doesn't just brush off a woman in desperate need of help, he calls her a dog.

It's OK to be uncomfortable with this part of the story, because I think we do need to take it seriously. Sometimes people forget that spiritual leaders have feelings. We do, and we don't always express them gracefully.

But Jesus's harsh words are not the end of the story. The woman responds with sharp wit, playing off Jesus's image without contradicting him, yet still placing herself in a position within the image that shows her getting what she wants. And I for one would be delighted to be sheltered under God's table and feast on the crumbs that fall from it. Of course Jesus is impressed. He wasn't used to being in such clever company. "Game recognize game," as they say. Even though she came from a different culture and religion, the woman's faith and wit connect her to Jesus's divinity, a beautiful and powerful result.

The incident also connects us with the solution to a timeless problem of human nature.

Jesus may not have been bigoted toward Gentiles, he might

just have said what a person in his culture would say when one of them irritated him, but he certainly sets an example for everyone to get over their bigotry. The story may reflect the difficulty of accepting Gentiles into what began as a Jewish church, and it gives a theological basis for their ultimate acceptance. The American Baptist pastor Rhonda J. Cushman wrote, “This glimpse into a strangely troubling Jesus challenges me to continually learn new things about how to be a human being; and it reveals a glimpse into the astounding commitment of a God who would so thoroughly embrace the limitations and messiness of incarnation— becoming a truly human being.”

This story also reminds us that acceptance, healing, and grace don't always come easily. They can come out of tense interactions. They can come out of ugly situations, which is where they are needed the most. St. Paul gives us a hint when he talks about “the birth-pangs.” Today's reading from Isaiah is more explicit: he talks about a better world that God will usher in, but first he speaks of “vengeance” and “terrible recompense.” So in today's Gospel, the intense interaction and the intense healing may be meant to parallel each other.

The Good News is that by God's grace, God will bring us into the world God intends for us, a better world than we ever could design, and the difficulties that may come along the way will only be temporary. But all of us can take small steps toward living in that world by acting as God intends, by engaging with people who are difficult to love, taking them seriously, being curious about who they are, and being responsive to their needs.

The complexity of the story itself teaches us how we can move through difficult interactions with confidence and hope. Because if we take the difficult interaction in today's Gospel

seriously, then we get to take the healing seriously, too. That is the end of the story. The demon had left her daughter. The early church must have taken the story seriously, because they did choose to welcome Gentiles as full and equal members under one Lord, holding one faith, initiated by one baptism, worshipping one God and Father of all. God shows no partiality; neither should the people of God.