

If you would be so kind, I ask you to indulge me for a couple of minutes. I would like to try a little exercise that involves your imagination. So, to begin, I ask you to sit back, close your eyes and let go of the clutter of thoughts that are likely present in each of your heads. With your eyes still closed, let your imagination start working and begin to picture Jesus. Take a few seconds to think about the image of Jesus you are seeing in your mind's eye. Note what he looks like and what you see him doing. Now, open your eyes and I am going to ask you a few questions.

In your imagined picture of Jesus.....

- Does he have a full beard or is he beardless?
- Is he calm, serene, pleasant and peaceful?
- Is he wearing a white garment?
- Is he surrounded by children, maybe holding one on his lap?
- Is he smiling?
- Are his arms stretched out in welcome?
- Is he doing some kind of miracle or offering food to the hungry?

Now, be very honest with yourself. Did you respond with a "yes" to many of these questions? The truth of the matter is that, for most of us, our image of Jesus was shaped by stories we learned in childhood and the pictures we have seen, pictures that were often used in children's Bibles. And, quite frankly, most of those pictures depict a calm, happy, inviting Jesus. However, if we take an honest look at the gospels, we often see a

very different picture of Jesus. In all of the Gospels, we find stories where Jesus displays very human, even unlikable, characteristics. There are times when he really seems annoyed with the stupidity of the disciples, and other times when he seems truly overwhelmed by the burden he is bearing. There are stories where Jesus is reclusive, grumpy and even sarcastic. And, today, we get one of those stories.

In the chapters preceding today's story, Jesus has been performing miracles. He has fed the 5,000 and walked on water. He has been healing the sick and demon-possessed, and there is no doubt he is seeking some much needed rest. So today, as he seeks respite, we find him heading into the region of Tyre and Sidon, land that is Gentile, pagan territory. While there, he is noticed and approached by a Syrophenician, Greek woman whose daughter has an unclean spirit. She begs him to cure her daughter. And, Jesus replies, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

Whoa!! Jesus rebuffs this woman and dismisses her with a blatant, ethnic slur. You see, during Biblical times, the word "dog" was commonly used as a derogatory insult in reference to Gentiles. And, the Gentiles were considered so unclean, the Jewish people called them "dogs." Anyway, Jesus' response to this foreign woman does not stop there. He

also makes it clear that his own people, the Jews, should be fed first. He is saying, it isn't right to take food that is meant for the Jews and give it to dogs, the Gentiles.

I have to say, this is probably not the image of Jesus we usually conjure up in our minds. As theologian, David Lose, suggests:

We want to think of Jesus as full-bodied, perfect, and immutable from birth, kind of like Athena springing full-grown from the head of Zeus. But if we are to take Mark's narrative seriously, never mind the incarnational and creedal affirmation that Jesus is fully human as well as fully divine, then perhaps we should not be surprised to see a development in Jesus' own recognition of God's vision for the world. After all, the profoundly expansive notion of a kingdom that included everyone – no exceptions! – was completely and totally novel. And, truthfully, it still is!

Well, what is so amazing about this story is that this woman does **not** back down. She does not become defensive and, instead of being offended or discouraged, she presses on. She has a sick daughter and she wants healing for her daughter. So, this culturally unconventional woman who is breaking all kinds of rules by coming to Jesus in the first place, uses Jesus' own words **against** him and bests him in the argument saying, "Fine, you can call me a dog, but even dogs get crumbs that fall from the table."

The truth of the matter is, this Gentile woman teaches **Jesus**, a Jewish man, the true meaning of what he has just reminded his own followers in the verses prior to this. If you remember last week's reading, Jesus had

reprimanded the Pharisees saying their social conventions, the purity codes, rules that had become religious ritual, were not what is important. What is important is the stuff that comes out of the human heart. It is the stuff that comes from the heart that can either pollute and destroy relationships **or** compassionately build community.

Well, today, this Gentile woman becomes a living parable in Jesus' very human experience as she insists that social conventions should **not** stand in the way of compassion and helping those in need. And, as this courageous, prophetic Syrophenician woman confronts Jesus, **he** has a "conversion" experience. This woman of great faith changes **Jesus** and opens him up for ministry to the Gentiles. Impressed by the woman's courage and faith, Jesus responds saying, ""You're right! On your way. Your daughter is no longer disturbed. The demonic affliction is gone." (The Message)

This Gentile woman crosses the Jewish/Gentile boundary, a barrier established by human beings, in order to separate and discriminate. And, the barrier that had been created to divide people into categories of "us" and "them" has been called into question. This foreign woman draws for Jesus a bigger picture of who God is, and the good news that is embodied in Jesus now becomes good news that has the world as its focus. Jesus

actually **receives** strength from this **woman** whose faith changes **him** as he is forced to live into a broader understanding of his mission and ministry.

The broadening of the heart and mind to include the “others” in life is one of the most difficult psychological maneuvers there is. I find this to be a challenge we face each and every day. Far too often, we want to build walls to keep the “others” out. We work to exclude the “others” in our lives, whether it is within our family structures, our communities, or even within our nation. And, we tend to project what we don’t like in ourselves on to the “other.” We tend to see the “other” as less than us, not as fully human, sometimes not even as loved by God. In today’s reading, we see it is the **“other”** who helps Jesus grasp that in God the barriers are broken down, in God things are turned inside out and upside down. In God, no human beings are labeled as “dogs,” only children. **All** are considered God’s children.

Scripture really does paint a very **different** picture of Jesus than the one we so often conjure up in our minds. In today’s reading, we see Jesus in his full humanity, vulnerable and open to being changed. And, it is in his full humanity that we discover what divinity is all about. In Jesus’ full humanity, we discover the God whose loves and welcomes **all!**