

- 1) Again and again in The Gospel of Mark, Jesus pours His energy into acts of healing.
- He heals those who are blind, lame, paralyzed, malformed, bleeding, demon-possessed.
 - He raises one who's in bed with only a fever, and another who's on her death-bed.
 - He does all this in homes, synagogues, marketplaces, on roadsides, in a graveyard.
 - He heals folks who congregate spontaneously in open-air clinics.
and those who come for individual attention.
 - He heals some who ask for it, some who don't,
and some whose demons resist Him—kicking and screaming.
 - Male and female, old and young, Jew and Gentile—He heals them, each and all.

He seems, in short, the quintessential equal accessibility physician—nobody gets turned away. But it sure does sound like the desperate woman about whom we just heard comes within a heart-beat of being turned away:

Let the children be fed first, it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.

If, in the waiting room, before a medical appointment, I overheard THAT from my doctor, I wouldn't want treatment for myself, from this doc, let alone for my child—no matter how well-credentialed or regarded the physician might be.

Whatever Jesus is doing here, it doesn't sound like a best practice in bedside manner.

- 2) But let's not rush to judgment—there may be other factors to consider.
- Though He HAS crossed the boundary before, the gender wall is, in Jesus' day, a very big deal. Women aren't supposed to speak to men.
- And, in fact, of the three women Jesus has, in Mark's telling, healed thus far: two (Peter's mother-in-law, and the twelve-year-old daughter of a synagogue leader)—these two have been either accompanied or interceded for by men.
- The third woman has touched the hem of Jesus' cloak incognito—intent on avoiding notice. But THIS woman—well, just a bit lippy, don't you think?
- Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs!*
- He's male—in this cultural setting she has no business addressing him, let alone crossing Him. When she came up to Him and bowed at His feet, she was way out of line already. So does that give Dr. Jesus a moral pass for his rude remark? Not from me—from you?

- 3) So maybe it it's not the woman, but where Jesus Himself is at that might cut Him some slack.
- Maybe He's just too dog tired to keep from calling her a dog.
- Perhaps He's come to foreign territory because he really needs a break.
- No doctor can keep going from the ER to the OR without eventually needing some R & R. Yes, He's God's Own Son, but HEY—he's wasted—he's human, after all.
- Maybe this is just one of his Divinity Down Days.
- Having a little all too human snit fit makes him . . . well . . . vulnerable, easier to identify with. To which my response would be: I wouldn't want to risk such vulnerability in an everyday doc. And if Dr. Jesus can snap like that, I'd always be wondering: When will He blow next?

Besides, to say that *He's having a Divinity Down Day* just doesn't work.

IF Jesus is both divine and human, it doesn't mean that, on different days, he's one or the other.

Every moment of every day of His life, he totally immersed in both—Poor Guy.

If we are going to get at what's going on in this tense encounter, we'll have to look further.

And—though ethnicity and economics won't serve as an excuse—

any more than the woman's gender, or the man's humanity—

ethnicity and economics are, nevertheless, formidable elephants in this healing room.

4) Ethnicity—the woman is not just a Gentile, she's a Syrophenician.

We needn't dwell on the grisly details of the long, tortured history.

But there has been bad blood between her folks and His folks for generations.

Envision the world's most recent racial flare-up, put it on steroids, and you get the picture.

Jews and Syrophenicians don't get along, and they don't make nice.

But it's not just ethnicity, it ethnicity enmeshed with economics.

The Gentiles in Tyre, where Jesus is staying, are, by and large, wealthier and more urban than the resident Jewish minority, who are by and large peasants.

The Jewish peasants depend for their livelihood on selling grain to the Gentile villagers.

So, in times of famine, where will the grain GO that these Jewish peasants grow?

To the villages? Then how will the peasant families eat?

To the peasants? Then how will they earn enough make a living for those families?

And that bitter, oppressive, no-win economic stranglehold is, quite likely,

the source of a proverb that was making the rounds—the proverb goes like this:

Let the children be fed first, it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.

So—Jesus repeats what the woman herself has probably heard—and more than once.

The question is, HOW does He say it, and WHAT does He MEAN by it?

That's a HARD question, because Mark's text doesn't come complete with drama script directions.

But I want to explore one possible take on the WAY Jesus says what He does;

and WHY He employs what is, in fact, a racial slur.

In response to her plea, I see him raising his eyebrows, and with tongue in cheek

saying something like: *What would YOU say, if I said TO you what my people say ABOUT you, especially when the needs of my people are great and their resources are thin.*

Suppose I told you:

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

What would YOU say to THAT?

The woman responds in a heartbeat—straight FROM her heart:

Sir! Even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs!

There ARE layers and layers of difference and dispute between your folks and mine.

*But the fact is, we are—your folks and mine—members of one family—
a family who need the same food and come to the same table.*

If your kind must see my kind as dogs—well, even dogs get to be treated as part of the family.

And Dr. Jesus—in a heartbeat—responds straight from HIS heart:

For this saying you may go. You have turned upside down and thus totally transformed the meaning of DOG in the parable. The DEMON has LEFT your daughter.

5) I'll tell you what I think—see what you think:

- Jesus is NOT first venting racial spleen, then having a “sorry about that” change of heart.
- Jesus is NOT giving the woman a theological litmus test.
- Jesus is NOT just teasing her—messing with her mind.
- Jesus IS inviting this woman to share with Him in His own healing work—
not just in the immediate work of releasing a demon from her daughter,
but in the longer-term work of exorcizing layers of demons dividing her folks and His.

Interesting theory—but where's it coming from—is there any evidence?

I think Mark himself suggests such evidence in his sweeping account of Jesus' healing ministry.

This is not the first time that Jesus has brought a woman
out of the social shadows into the center of attention.

Remember that 12-year bleeding woman who surreptitiously touched His cloak?

Jesus outed her, didn't He—not to embarrass her or to shame her—but to tell her—
not that HE had healed her; but that (quote) HER faith had made her well.

She was a co-participant in the healing process—and it wasn't just a physical healing.

It was a restoring to community for one who had long been outcast as UNCLEAN.

A healing that made everybody rethink both their understanding of her,
and their understanding of what it means to be treated as though you WERE unclean.

After THAT encounter—Mark tells us—when Jesus returns to his OWN home town,

(Quote:) *He could do NO miracles THERE because of their UNBELIEF.*

Still later, Jesus encounters religious leaders whose tradition and ethnicity He shares.

They are, alas, bent out of shape because His disciples have eaten with unclean hands.

Taking leave of what should have been a shared space of identity, belief, and practice;

Jesus ventures into territory that His own people would regard as “unclean in the extreme”.

As He has done when encountering the bleeding woman, he honors THIS “unclean” woman—
by inviting her participation in the healing that she demands with gritty, gutsy faith.

Does the way Jesus engages with the woman have wider implications for her society and His?

I think Mark's Gospel, in fact, suggests such a wider implication.

In the very next episode Mark records—the one we also heard today—

Jesus, still in Gentile territory, heals a man who is deaf and mute—

And He does so in a way that is similarly intrusive to his blunt encounter with this woman.

When the man is released from whatever blocks his hearing, he is once again free to speak.

I can't help wondering if what is being exorcised—

for that woman, for her daughter, for the deaf/mute man,

for all of THEIR people and for Jesus' OWN people—

I can't help wondering whether what is being exorcised, one encounter at a time,

is the deafening cacophony of dismissive and divisive speech—

ugly speech that, if shut down, opens the possibility of initiating quiet table talk—

talk among those with distinctive differences, painful histories, deep suspicions,

but who are nonetheless all children in God's own family.

6) Today's second healing story ends, as do others in Mark's Gospel, with Jesus trying unsuccessfully to keep word of His healing under wraps.

Why would He do that? Heal—then seek to prevent drawing any attention to His efforts?

Perhaps, in part, because He doesn't want folks totally fixated on their own individual maladies (serious though they be).

Perhaps he wants to redirect their attention to the illness and brokenness in their social systems, focus more broadly on the divisions that can make interactions at places like—

oh, say, recent congressional hearings—

sometimes sound almost like they are demon possessed.

The one time in Mark's Gospel when Jesus gives not only leave but command

to spread the healing word is when he drives out a whole Legion of destructive demons from a man—another Gentile—who has lived in the tombs and cut himself to shreds.

After the man is healed, (QUOTE) "clothed and in his right mind,"

Jesus explicitly sends him back to his own people, not to tell them how great a healer Jesus is; but to tell them how much God has done for him—how much mercy God has shown him.

His listeners may not have had his illness, but they need God's mercy just as much.

7) In the midst of all our mutual judging, we could use such healing mercy in our land, could we not?

What might it take to see it and hear it?

What might it take, not just to wait for such mercy, but to work for it, and work with it?

What might it require for us to address our own equivalents of Clean and Unclean?

What might it mean to do—as, together, Jesus and the woman do—

to take proverbs and practices that foster partiality, and turn them totally on their heads?

Neither the healing ministry of Jesus in Mark's Gospel,

nor the moral exhortations in the Letter of James give us a check list of strategies and solutions.

But reading, marking, learning, and inwardly digesting each

might well help us better frame the issues we need to address,

and, even more, to frame the way we undertake our conversations—vigorously, yet graciously.