

When I was in the third grade, I met a girl—quite exotic—whose father, a military man, had met her mother in Korea. After the war, they came back to the States to start a family and when they moved into our neighborhood, Seong and I started walking to school together. I developed a little bit of a crush on her. She was tall and elegant and mysterious.

One morning, I referred to her by a word I had just heard. I won't repeat it here; I'll just say that sounded to me like a cute little nickname. I will never, for the rest of my life, forget the look that came across her face. I was horrified by what I had just done. It was the first time I had ever tasted racism in my own mouth. I never want to feel that way again. Ever. And I never want anyone to feel the way that she did. Ever. It took years to heal the wound in our relationship, but maybe that's the reason that I see a pattern in this story from Mark.

Now, there are those who want Jesus to be superhuman—people who claim that Jesus was simply testing the woman in our story, dropping a hint with a nod and a wink to her to tip her off. Others claim that Jesus was just joking or that when he referred to the woman and her family as “dogs,” he meant “sweet little puppies” as an endearment. You know, like the word I used, meaning for it to be a harmless little flirtation.

Then there are those who want to paint Jesus as subhuman—people who insist that Jesus intended to perpetrate white, supremacist bigotry. Most of those folks are critics of Christianity, but there are a handful of Christians who argue that Jesus degraded this woman deliberately.

Neither extreme is necessary. Of all the portrayals of Jesus in scripture, Mark's Jesus is the *most* human. A human Jesus who is part of a social system that is invisible to him until the woman he insults shakes him into awareness. What Jesus *does* with this wounding is a teaching moment for Jesus and for us.

Jesus was in the city of Tyre, whose inhabitants were bitter enemies of the Jews. The ancient historian Josephus recorded that Tyrians killed and imprisoned numerous Jews during the Jewish rebellion against Rome at about the time that Mark's Gospel was written. Jewish farmers lived in the Galilean back-country and rural regions around Tyre, where they produced most of the food for Tyre and Sidon. But city dwellers bought and stored so much of the harvest for themselves each season that the rural farmers often went hungry.

So imagine if I started a modern version of our Gospel story by saying, "A Jewish rabbi from Israel went into Lebanon with his friends for a retreat. One day, a wealthy woman who was a member of Hezbollah came to the house where he was staying and bowed down at his feet..."

Jesus is not simply in Gentile territory, he is in dangerous territory. He has claimed from the beginning of Mark that the kingdom of God has come near, but up to this point Jesus has appeared uncertain about just how the Gentiles fit in. Throughout Mark's Gospel, God's "already-and-not-yet" reign shows up in surprising and unexpected circumstances.

Seeds of heaven are strewn about indiscriminately and sprout without cultivation. Those who should understand seem ignorant or hard-hearted. God's grace breaks into the world through howling demoniacs, a child at the point of death and a bleeding women who takes her healing from Jesus in a way that he could feel but could not stop. Jesus appears to have little control over God's in-breaking heaven.

This is the Jesus who, except for the insult, offers a reasonable response to this Gentile: Not "no," but simply "not yet." Seems a fair thing to say, doesn't it? Jesus has focused his energy and efforts on the Jews, not on the Gentiles. The Gentiles *will* get the message of God's reconciling and liberating love—the bread that Jesus offers—but *after* the children of Israel. It seems reasonable to feed the poor rural Jews first rather than to once more give their food to the rich Gentiles living in the cities.

But then there's that insult.

Remember that in the passage immediately before this morning's reading, Jesus taught the disciples that what defiles a person—that is to say, what makes a person unprepared to worship God—comes from the deliberations of the human heart. Not from what goes into a person, but from what comes *out* of a person. Jesus, here, allowed something hurtful to come out.

Maybe he was distracted by the fact that the people he has offered bread have largely rejected him. Moral failures in scripture often happen at crucial points where people of strength and conviction seem primed to succeed. They often fall short at the brink of the most important moments.

In this moment, for whatever reason, Jesus has not heard the deeply human plea of this worried mother. She demonstrated her faith by coming to Jesus alone and he responded to her with an insult based on her nationality; the kind of action that separates and damages relationships. The lesson is in what happens next.

Once again, a woman begins to take her healing from Jesus. So while many of us think of Mary, the mother of Jesus, as our own spiritual mother, it is the Syrophenician woman who brought most of us to God's table because most of us, after all, are Gentiles. She trusted Jesus as the agent of God's heaven in ways that even he did not yet clearly see.

She did not react to Jesus' failure of hospitality but instead appealed to God's mercy as a reflection of her own human experience. Dogs, in her first century Mediterranean world, were not kept as pets. They were scavengers tolerated around people's homes, but she would never have prepared food for them, let alone invite them to eat at the same table as her beloved daughter. Even so, the dogs got fed just as her daughter did and at the same time.

Her challenge jolted Jesus into a larger awareness of his mission. If mercy is a daily reality for the dogs who wander into her house, how could God's house offer less than that? Her hopeful claim on God's boundless mercy enabled Jesus, himself, to live into it in a new way. Jesus learned, as we must, that by encountering and acknowledging the failures that

destroy relationships we can open ourselves to the grace and growth that God offers through the cracks and ruptures.

The woman's daughter is healed and Jesus is awakened to a new larger understanding. Maybe that's what walks him deeper into Gentile territory, moving from Tyre to Sidon, where another miracle happens—one that is sometimes overlooked. But together with the woman's story, it completes a pattern of healing.

Jesus has been found wanting; he has not heard a person in pain and he has spoken with a damaged tongue. Having recognized that and cleaned up his failure, he now meets a man suffering from a *physical* inability to hear and a *physical* impediment to his speech. Here, the authors of Mark's Gospel lead us into a fog of pronouns. We heard it in English. Here's a Greek rendering:

“...and having taken aside him from the crowd privately he put the fingers of him into the ears of him and having spit he touched the tongue of him. And having looked up to the heaven he sighed and is saying to him Ephphatha which means be you opened up. And immediately were opened up of him the hearings and was loosened the bond of the tongue of him and he was speaking properly. And he cautions them that to no one they may be telling...”

Well, you get the idea. It is a fog with marvelous effect: Who is doing what to whom? Who is opening and who is being opened? Who is healing and who is being healed? This is the pattern of spiritual healing as God transforms wounds into sources of love. If you have been widowed, God can work through your experience as a gift to those just beginning that walk. If you have lived through the death of a child, God can work through your aching heart as a source of companionship for those freshly grieving. God's *healing* love grows in the cracks of broken hearts.

If you have ever hurt someone or been hurt by another through a comment, a gesture or a word, God's reconciling love can shine through holes in our fear and through gaps in our defensiveness to transform failure into relationship.

Think of it: a desperate mother's fierce love prompted Jesus to live into God's reconciling, liberating love in a whole new way. The one sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel found himself one of two people who could not hear or speak as God intended. With a newly expanded awareness, Jesus chose to act in love and both people were changed.

We, too, can act with trust in God's healing if we acknowledge and walk toward Christ after encountering the systemic evil that has bound or damaged our tongues and stopped up our ears while our brothers and sisters carry the burden of rejection.

God offers to all of us mercy, love and reconciliation like bread to feed our hungry hearts, like hands to touch and heal our woundedness. God's heavenly banquet table overflows with an abundance of grace for all people—people of all ages, people of all genders and orientations, people of all nations, people of all races, people in positions of power and people in powerless positions. God's heaven is at hand. Let yourself be opened!