

FULLY HUMAN

“Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting. “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David, my daughter is tormented by a demon.” But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat at the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” Then Jesus answered her, “Woman great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.” **Matthew 15:21-28**

I grew up in Sunday School. We learned all about Jesus - we even had pictures. You know the pictures I’m talking about: an Anglo-Saxon male in a white robe with a red sash; long, wavy, well conditioned, brown hair, a child in his lap, and a benevolent smile on his face - the pretty Jesus pictures.

And we learned about a pretty Jesus - a Jesus who loved children and called disciples and fed a lot of people. A Jesus who worked amazing miracles and talked to his father in heaven. A Jesus who loved us so much he was willing to die for us and be raised from the dead.

When I got to middle school, I graduated from Sunday School classrooms and entered junior high youth group. We learned about Jesus in youth group too - but this was different Jesus. This was a Jesus who ate with outcasts and sinners (the people no one else would eat with). This was a Jesus who called people to follow him, to feed the poor and heal the sick. This was a Jesus who said, ‘whatever you do for the least of these, you do for me.’ This was a Jesus who inspired me to do volunteer work and go on mission trips and wear a bracelet so I could always think about what Jesus would do.

In high school, some of my friends started going to a Catholic youth group and they learned about Jesus there too. But this also was a different Jesus - this was a Jesus who was a personal savior, who could save even me. This was a Jesus they sang about - about how they wanted to know him, touch him, be with him in a secret place. This was a Jesus who could be their best friend - a Jesus who would walk with them through the trauma of high school. This Jesus could even be their boyfriend, if they couldn’t find a nice Christian boy.

When I went to college, I entered a Religious Studies Department in a non-Christian school and I learned about Jesus there too. Again, it was a different Jesus. This Jesus was an historical figure. This Jesus was a failed revolutionary. This Jesus mattered only because some people claim faith in him. This was a Jesus who could be picked apart, criticized and questioned. This was a theoretical Jesus - he couldn’t touch us - because we were scholars.

I've said it before, and I'll say it again: I don't get Jesus. I'm good with a Creator God, I'm great with the Spirit. I like the concept of the Trinity - even the idea that God became human. But I don't get Jesus.

I carry around with me these four pictures of this one person and I'm not entirely comfortable with any of them. I come to this text with these four images and a lot skepticism and I read about Jesus ignoring a woman in need, I read about Jesus calling people dogs and everything I thought I might know gets blown out of the water.

This is not my pretty, innocent Sunday School Jesus. This is not even my social justice middle school Jesus. This is certainly not the personal Jesus of my high school friends. And it's not my objective, historical Jesus from college either. This Jesus is rude to the woman, this Jesus calls people dogs and I want to know why because *I've* called Jesus my Lord and Savior.

If you want let Jesus off the hook, it's not too hard. I only read half of the lectionary assigned for today. There is a section before this passage that is offered as a possibility as well. And it helps. Jesus calls a crowd around him and he begins to teach: "Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles." The disciples come up after, concerned about Jesus' reputation among the Pharisees, and Jesus does his best to explain that Jewish laws are no longer the end all be all, but you can tell he is beginning to get frustrated with the fact that the disciples . . . they never seem to get it. So they continue on their way and encounter this Gentile woman crying for help - her daughter is being tormented by a demon. So, it is quite possible, and even reasonable, to understand Jesus' response as a lesson to the disciples - don't you understand what you sound like when you try to show preferential treatment to the Jews? I know you think the Messiah has come only for Jews, but do you hear what you sound like - the people in need whom you turn away? It's a well timed lesson. It makes a bigger point. And, in the end, Jesus shows once again what is really true - he has come for all, and he heals the woman's daughter.

Or, you could read the passage as a lesson in faith. Much like the widow who continually batters the judge, this woman persists in her faith until Jesus recognizes her and rewards her faithfulness. There is surely a lesson for us here as well - even when God doesn't answer, persist, your faithfulness will be rewarded.

There are many ways to read this passage, many important lessons to be gleaned from Jesus' encounter with this woman; and, if you want to let Jesus off the hook - it is certainly possible, and perhaps even appropriate. But I think we have to take seriously the fact that Jesus is a jerk in this passage.

[pause]

When we rush to figure out what Jesus is trying to teach us or when we focus on the tenacity of the woman and her faithfulness, we ignore the rough words Jesus speaks to her, we ignore her humiliation and we gloss over the parts of Jesus we don't like.

While I think it is important to keep this passage in context, I also think it is important to make sure we tell the story of the woman, not only because her story deserves to be told, but also because I think we learn something important about Jesus himself through her story. Let's make sure then that we've really heard what happened to this woman:

She is a Gentile woman, a foreigner, who sees Jesus with his disciples and starts shouting for his attention. She uses Jewish titles to address him, 'have mercy on me, *Lord, Son of David.*' Clearly she knows to whom she is speaking, and while she has raised her voice, she uses the most respectful words possible. She is desperate, her daughter (whom we know nothing about) is being tormented by a demon. So she has come to Jesus in hopes that he might heal her daughter.

The details are sparse - we don't know if she believes in Jesus, or if she has simply heard rumors and is willing to try anything. All we hear are her words. *Have mercy on me . . .*

[pause]

And then there is silence.

[pause]

Jesus does not answer her at all. He doesn't speak to her, he doesn't acknowledge her - her cry for help lands on deaf ears. I don't know about you, but I know how that feels. To cry out for God, in need, desperate for help, and to hear nothing? To wonder if God even knows you're standing there? It is a frustrating and helpless position to be in, and I feel for this woman.

And, then, if that were not enough, the disciples come and urge Jesus to send her away because she is shouting after them. Here is this woman, desperate for help, doing all she can, and the disciples complain because she is being annoying. "I know your daughter is being tormented, but you're getting on my nerves"? This poor woman, she is being pushed out and *still* Jesus does not acknowledge her. He answers the *disciples*, 'I've come only for the lost sheep of Israel.'

[pause]

We might know the history of where Jesus has been; we might know what he was trying to teach his disciples. We might be able to read his response as facetious, a way to teach a lesson. But this woman - she can't know all of that, she can't know that she is being used to make a larger point. She only hears that her hope, maybe even her last hope, has not come for her but for someone else.

Yet she is persistent. She gets down on her knees before Jesus and begs for help. And still Jesus dismisses her and he goes one step further. He calls her a dog and says she does not deserve his help.

And she does the unthinkable, she tries once more. And finally . . . finally Jesus answers her and heals her daughter.

Jesus may teach an important lesson about who he has come for in his interaction with this woman. I *do* think he is being facetious, showing the disciples how ridiculous they are being by excluding those who are not Jewish. But, we can't ignore the fact that he uses someone in the process. This isn't the Jesus that I've learned about, my Jesus would have cared for this woman in her time of need. My Jesus would be able to make his point without using someone. This Jesus doesn't fit any of my categories, and while I appreciate the lesson, I don't think the end justifies the means; I think Jesus comes across as an asshole in this passage and I don't get it. I don't understand and I feel badly for the woman. And I want to know who this Jesus is.

It is really tempting to try and let Jesus off the hook, to rationalize his behavior until he fits into one of my four categories. But I just can't do it; Jesus is too rude and too insensitive - I can't make him fit. And maybe that is a lesson from this text as well.

I keep feeling like I have to apologize for the fact that I don't get Jesus. I feel badly. I go to a Christian Seminary, I've claimed Jesus as my Lord and Savior, I hear people proudly claim to be Jesus freaks and to love Jesus and I feel like I'm missing something. I feel like if people find out that I don't *love* Jesus they'll think I don't belong here; and I'm worried if my CPM finds out they'll think I'm not fit for ministry.

But then I read about people who claim to know Jesus and I wonder what Jesus they have met. I read about people who claim to know Jesus so well that they know Jesus wouldn't save this person, and wouldn't love that person for all of who they are. I've met people who claim to know Jesus, but don't know their neighbors and think the poor have done something to deserve their lot. I meet and read about people who claim to know Jesus and think that maybe I don't really want to know Jesus.

And I read this passage and my desire to love and know Jesus does not exactly shoot through the roof. I don't want to know a Jesus who is rude. I don't want to know a Jesus who uses people to make a point. I want to know a Jesus who is personal and loving and kind and still change things. I want my savior to be perfect - to do what I cannot. I want my savior to set a good example that I can preach to other people. I want my savior to be fully God. But I read this passage and can't help but remember that Jesus was fully human as well.

Fully human means that Jesus is going to be rude sometimes. Fully human means that Jesus isn't perfect and he might use people to teach a bigger lesson. Fully human means Jesus isn't any one thing. No one picture or Sunday School poster is going to cover all of who Jesus is - just like one picture of us never fully captures all of who we are. Fully human means that Jesus isn't any one of the images I learned about growing up - it means he is a messy combination of many things, just like the rest of us. But fully human also means that Jesus really was like we are. Jesus really can relate to what it means to be human - to be in need, to be in pain, to stand and cry out to a God who doesn't seem to hear you. Jesus really does know - and that is Good News.

[Most days I want my savior to be fully God, but we claim faith in a Jesus who is fully human AND fully God. Fully human and fully God means that lessons get taught. Fully human and fully God means that people do get healed. Fully human and fully God means bigger than us - bigger than images and boxes we try to fit him in, bigger than the denominations and splinter groups that try to claim sole knowledge of him. Fully human and fully God means I don't have to get it, we don't have to always get it, because fully human and fully God means Jesus is bigger than we can imagine and in a world that has more problems than I can even imagine being solved that is best news I've heard in awhile.]

Thanks be to God who so loved the world that he sent his only son, Jesus Christ, fully human and fully God..