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# OH, NO, HE DIDN'T!

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*Mark 7:24-37*



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Could Jesus be a bigot? Did you hear it? Jesus dismissed a desperate woman with a seriously sick child, with a popular, 1<sup>st</sup> century, Jewish ethnic slur.

In these days of *#blacklivesmatter*, and the realization that racism wasn't "fixed" with the civil rights movements of the 60's, I think that thoughtful, questioning Christians need to take a look at this disturbing and possibly disorienting possibility.

My first response was, "Of course not! Jesus wasn't racist! He would never..." But this passage seems to tell a different story. Jesus calls a woman, desperate for a miracle for her child, a dog – a common ethnic slur of the time.

Jesus uttered a racial slur; and no matter what theological tap dance we might do to get around it, we need to come to terms with this uncomfortable truth.

Regardless of the theological debates about whatever social and cultural dynamics are going on here, Jesus still holds all the power. The woman doesn't approach Jesus with arrogance or entitlement. She has no wealth or privilege. She comes to Jesus in the most humble, most human way possible, pleading with him in desperation. Jesus responds to her by dehumanizing her with ethnic prejudice -- maybe even bigotry. In 2015, coming up on an election year, we're all too aware of the fact, and we see it every day: *power + prejudice = racism*.

This story should stop us in our tracks.

Part of our struggle with this passage is that, as Christians, we want Jesus to be a simple, easy, answer to all our problems -- and all society's problems, too. Our mantra has become "What would Jesus do?" as if that would solve everything. What would Jesus do? Dismiss a desperate woman just because she was of a different race and/or religion?

If we're forced to look at the complex issues of personal and systemic racism, isn't it easier to just believe that Jesus rises above all those problems -- rising above all the petty bigotry -- loving everybody regardless of skin color, culture, or religion?

I want Jesus to be colorblind. After all isn't that what the song teaches us?

*Jesus loves the little children;  
All the children of the world.  
Red and yellow black and white;  
They are precious in his sight....*

So what happened? In the book of Mark, Jesus seems anything but colorblind. In fact, rather than being part of the solution, he seems to be part of the problem. Ethnic prejudice was alive and well 2,000 years ago. Haven't we learned anything?

So what does it mean, exactly, that the Son of God, the incarnation, the second person of the Trinity, utters an ethnic slur in a situation where he held all the power?

Because that's exactly what Jesus did in this exchange with the Syrophenician woman. When the gentile pagan makes her request, he responds, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Jesus' message and ministry is for Israelites only, he explains, which sounds kind of familiar doesn't it? Maybe there's a Pagan/Gentile water fountain around the corner, too.

In other words, Jesus says it wouldn't be fair to take the banquet prepared for his people – the children, the humans – and give it to the Gentiles – the less than human, the dogs.

There are numerous attempts by scholars to whitewash this uncomfortable response, explaining that maybe Jesus had a knowing twinkle in his eye. As if she were somehow in on the joke when he called the desperate woman a dog.

Others tell us that the word for dog Jesus uses here isn't the typical strong language used in 1<sup>st</sup> century ethnic insults. Jesus is using a diminutive form of the word, like he's talking about a cute puppy or a lapdog. That takes the sting out of it, right? FYI - dogs were not pets in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine.

Dominant, oppressive cultures have a long history of trying to ease their own latent guilt with terms of endearment for those they are oppressing. Try this: In your head, add the word 'little' to any ethnic or sexist slur. Does it help? Does it soften the insult? Does making the slur sound affectionate make it any less dehumanizing?

Another argument is that Jesus is using this exchange to teach the disciples some kind of lesson about the inclusivity of God's Kingdom. But then she's reduced to nothing more than a prop or an object in a lesson, as well as a dog.

What is this about? What should we think about this? Where is the good news, exactly?

Here's the lesson I take from this passage. It's a lesson about power and prejudice – of how even the Son of God, the Incarnate himself – can get caught up in systems of oppression.

How interesting that Jesus, born a Jew in a world of Roman oppression, also found himself born into a culture of supremacy. (I guess we're always better than somebody, huh?)

Like most of us today, 2,000 years ago Jesus was raised into a prejudiced worldview, too. As a good Jew Jesus was taught from an early age to thank God every day that he was born Jewish and not Gentile – a man and not a woman. How could Jesus not be caught up in such a culture of racism and sexism.

Because of his embedded culture, Jesus couldn't be colorblind any more than we can.

But wait. Being caught red-handed in this kind of prejudice doesn't make a person a bigot -- or a racist. It's what happens next that determines that. How do we respond when we're confronted with the stories of the oppressed -- the marginalized or Other – it's what we do then that reveals who we truly are. Do we continue to deny or ignore the realities of oppression. Do we mock them? Do we brush them aside – instead of really listening, do we respond to the plea of 'black lives matter' with the dismissive, 'all lives matter'? Of course all lives matter. That's a given. But if my house was on fire and I came to you for help, it wouldn't do me much good if you said, "all houses matter" and went back to your own house.

Could we – imagine – could we, like Jesus, do a miraculous thing and listen – and be changed by the power of the truth in their story?

That's the good news in this story. When this woman, boldly and in desperation, begs Jesus for help and confronts his ethnic slur, Jesus listens. He hears her story.

It's the only time in all four Gospels that Jesus changes his mind.

"Even the dogs get table scraps." I love it. It's a brilliant response that subtly calls out Jesus' dehumanizing language.

Jesus is astounded. This woman, who just a second ago was nothing but a dog to him, got his attention. The scales fall from his eyes as he listens to her, and he

sees her for what she really is: a woman of great faith, a mother of a sick child, and now his teacher.

Jesus does the most difficult thing for those of us born into the unfortunate privilege of dominance. He listens. And he allows himself to be profoundly changed.

When this happens, when we finally have ears to hear, we will never be the same. We will never be able to hear the lies of the oppressor the same way again. It happened to me in seminary. I wasn't prepared for the academic essays written by Latino and black women theologians. It happened when I heard my Lakota/Lutheran professor ask the darnedest question: freedom of religion – for whom, exactly? I heard Chicago area seminarians talking about the realities of ministry in Urban America. I learned to listen, and to allow myself to be changed.

I've heard my classmates – younger than me, and a bit more sheltered – talking about how hard it was. How disorienting and disturbing, even traumatizing. For in that moment of clarity and transformation, we can finally see, as I think Jesus did, our own embedded racism and prejudice, planted within us without our permission by the culture into which we were born.

You see, when Jesus listened to the Syrophenician woman, he not only heard the truth of her reality, he heard the brokenness of his own. Both have to happen. In order to confront ethnic prejudice and racism, we have to listen and hear that the stories of the oppressed and the marginalized are true.

This is hard. For those of us who are members of a privileged race, gender, sexuality, or faith, it's hard to accept another's reality without qualifications; to listen without interrupting; to hear without somehow reworking their experiences into our own embedded perspectives.

But we also have to hear the brokenness of our own realities and our own stories. We have to hear our own incompleteness. We have to hear how a knee-jerk response like 'All Lives Matter' diminishes the reality of a specific crisis without ever acknowledging it.

It's a very uncomfortable road to follow but if we have the courage to take it, privileged people like me will get to come face to face with our own prejudice and racism.

In the end, Jesus interaction with this woman is a powerful story for white people like me as we take a stand against racism and bigotry. It compels us to listen to the stories of the oppressed – the people we devalue without even realizing it. It requires that we listen to our own prejudice.

Can we do it? Can we do the unthinkable and admit our own culture's hate, and be transformed by the realities of the oppressed – the marginalized?

It's a message of hope – not guilt. I love the idea that Jesus can change and grow. Jesus, the redeemer of humanity, God incarnate and savior, listens and learns, and becomes even more inclusive.

We've followed Jesus this far – I expect that we can do no better than he did – that is, to listen to the people whose realities are so different from ours, and to let that new reality transform us, now and into the future. As God says in *Isaiah 43:19*, "Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"

If Jesus himself can learn and change his reactions – his embedded racism and ideas of who should be included and who shouldn't, then there's hope for all of us!

All this from a story about a pagan woman who hands Jesus' prejudice back to him without malice or vengeance, but with a thoughtful response that makes us all stop for second -- even dogs get crumbs.

Amen.