

## Mark 7:24-30

24 From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice,<sup>25</sup> but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet.<sup>26</sup> Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.<sup>27</sup> He said to her, 'Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.'<sup>28</sup> But she answered him, 'Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.'<sup>29</sup> Then he said to her, 'For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.'<sup>30</sup> So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

### No Dogs Allowed

I had a crazy thought recently. What if we could live our lives as avatars? Most of you know what an avatar is; it's a figure or image that represents you but doesn't have to look like you at all. It was most popularized with the 2009 movie directed by James Cameron. But anyone who knows about computer games knows that when you play a computer game, you can choose an avatar, some character in the game who responds to your commands. I know that sounds crazy, but you are already familiar with a few avatars if you do any online work with, say, Verizon – you can actually choose the avatar that you want to work with in handling your questions. There are businesses that will help your business create avatars to do the things like Amy, Jake, Lisa, Alex, and Kate will help you do. You can make your Avatars cartoon characters if you want. I think it would be great if you could make your avatar anything at all, like a monster similar to those in Pixar movies, or an emoji.

You may think this is unlikely to ever happen, but if it *did* happen it would go a long way toward eliminating a big problem of prejudice, at least prejudice based on appearance. Think about it; if everyone created their own avatar in whatever form they wanted it to be, no one would know the true color of your skin, much less how many heads you really had. How could there be discrimination, especially if you could change your avatar at will? Don't like purple people? Okay, today I'm going to be orange!

Today's gospel lesson deals with prejudice, and it is among the hardest lessons for Christians to stomach because Jesus seems to be the one who is prejudice. He initially refuses to help a woman who is not Jewish, and in so many words he calls her a dog. We don't like to think of Jesus as being prejudice or racist or misogynist, but it's hard *not* to think this from today's lesson. That's unsettling because we believe Jesus to be God incarnate, sent from heaven to save us from sin and death, but isn't racism a sin?

And rather than try to explain Jesus' comment away as some sort of a test for this woman, I'd rather look at it from a human point of view, as an offensive racist comment. And the very fact that Jesus said it should make us stop and think just how much racism or prejudice can be embedded in a culture. Think about what happens when you hear

an ethnic joke – my sister and I used to tell Hoosier jokes because we weren't really sure what a Hoosier was or if they even existed, so we figured we were less likely to offend anyone in the room (and if we did we'd perhaps discover what a Hoosier was). We'd also keep the jokes stupid, like *where do Hoosiers keep their armies? In their sleeve!* But we've all heard ethnic jokes, starting from a young age, and think of what happens when you hear them. You feel exclusive! I mean, the joke is not about you, or the person wouldn't be telling it in your presence; it's about someone whose not with you, whose not in your circle. And so something interesting happens when you hear an ethnic joke; you feel accepted by the crowd that you're with. And laughing at the joke reaffirms that you're not on the outside, you're not the one who's being laughed at. When you're young it's important to feel accepted, and so there's a good chance you will laugh at an ethnic joke whoever it pokes fun at. And it reinforces stereotypes about a particular ethnicity or nationality or vocation or whatever. So as a part of a particular group you start to draw distinctions based on stereotypes. You might even come up with your own ethnic jokes to tell to your friends to get a laugh and make you feel all the more a part of the "in" crowd. This sort of thing can happen on a local level among your closest friends at school, and it can occur on a national level as you distinguish yourself from people of other nations. You can easily see this played out in movies. If I start saying ethnicities, you immediately form a stereotype image in your mind; Italian, French, Irish, English, Polish, Russian, Chinese, Somalian, Mexican. And don't you think that people from those nations have their stereotyped images of Americans? And those images become exaggerated in a grotesque way when we're at war with other nations; we dehumanize our enemies because that makes it easier for us to kill them. We also dehumanize them when are intent is to exploit them, because that way we can tell ourselves that in exploiting them we're actually doing them a favor.

Anyway, enough our human tendency to denigrate those outside of our group. Suffice it to say that Jews in Jesus' time were not above prejudice, and prejudice is something that is passed down from generation to generation. Jesus grew up among a people who believed they were God's chosen people, which was a mindset that lent itself to prejudice, to the belief that we are the best and everyone else is chopped liver. And such prejudices are hard to resist. Perhaps Jesus himself was vulnerable to such prejudices to the degree that he would consider anyone who was not a Jew a dog!

But what we should focus on is what takes place after Jesus hurls this insult and refuses to take action for this foreign woman. The woman does not back down but rather continues her plea for her daughter. She doesn't confess to being a dog, but rather expresses to Jesus the notion that blessings cannot be contained, that even though she's not a Jew she is still hungry for God's mercy. And this challenges Jesus in a way that is truly transformative. This woman, who is an outsider, has the nerve to challenge Jesus, and she wins! When we engage in dialogue with those we dehumanize, guess what happens? THEY BECOME HUMAN! We see that they are no different from us, that a sick child is a sick child whether its Jewish or Syrophoenician or Tanzanian or Korean.

And I believe that Jesus own perception of his mission expanded on that day because this woman opened Jesus' eyes to the prejudice that consumed his people and continues to consume people today. God's kingdom would not be confined to the borders of Israel but would include all people, because all people were in need of God's healing, and God was not a God of Israel alone. God's kingdom is all-inclusive, and you and I, as disciples of Jesus, must recognize this truth just as we must recognize our own vulnerability to tribalism.

This experience for Jesus was life-changing. Jesus would next venture into a region known as the Decapolis which is present day Jordon and Syria, a non-Jewish region, where he continued his healing ministry apparently no longer distinguishing between children and dogs. And it was this inclusiveness that would come to characterize Christianity and turn a marginal Jewish sect into a global religion. Christians are everywhere, and we look upon one another as children of God equally loved, equally cherished, and equally blessed by God.

So my hat comes off to this Syrophoenician woman who refused to be diminished by those who are susceptible to cultural prejudice and may have been the catalyst that caused Jesus to better grasp God's plan for his people, indeed for all people.