

The Fruitful Field of Lebanon
Mark 7:24-30

Now, perhaps we expect controversial characters like Donald Trump to make disparaging remarks about women – at Thursday’s debate, Megyn Kelly reminded him that “You have called women you don’t like ‘fat pigs’, ‘dogs’, ‘slobs’, and ‘disgusting animals.’” But for Jesus to compare a woman to a dog, well, that’s a bit jarring. It seems so out of character.

So, who was this woman anyway? The King James Version calls her a Greek, which means she was a Gentile, a Syrophenician, living in the area around Tyre and Sidon. Now, it was unusual for Jesus to spend much time talking with people who weren’t Jews. And in fact, this was the only time in Jesus’ ministry that He went onto Gentile turf, to a place where He and His God were not only not respected, but where God’s people were roundly despised – a situation with which are likely to grow more and more familiar.

In fact, Tyre was a place we would recognize in many ways. It was wealthy, and its economy centered on trade. We don’t know if this woman herself was rich, but her culture certainly had access to goods from all over the known world and certainly put a lot of stock in material things – sound familiar?

And this woman likely worshipped one or all of the many different Phoenician gods. Since the people of Tyre and Sidon were seafaring people, they borrowed many of their religious ideas, and even some of their gods from the many different cultures surrounding the Mediterranean Sea. In other words, they were what many today would call sophisticated, cosmopolitan pluralists – not like those hick Jews who were so narrowminded and bigoted, insisting that there was only one True God.

But the people of Tyre and Sidon also adopted a few religious practices from the Canaanites, the original inhabitants of the land of Israel – including temple prostitution and child sacrifice. Since Matthew’s version of this story calls this Syrophenician woman a Canaanite, it is quite likely that she at least believed in such rituals, even if she may not have actively participated in them.

In short, Ancient Tyre was materialistic, proud, multicultural, pluralistic, sex-crazed and cruel, willing to sacrifice their children in order to gain material prosperity. But let’s go a little further, for we know that whatever power the false gods of the pagans may have had was actually demonic. And we know that this woman’s daughter was possessed by a devil, a demon, an unclean spirit. In other words, we know that this woman was part of a culture that sacrificed its children to demons, and we know that a demon had in fact come to live inside her daughter. It is thus very likely that she had gotten exactly what she had asked for.

And isn’t this the situation of so many people in America today? The big cities of the Northeast and the Far West are largely post-Christian – the Church is as forgotten there as it is despised. And as the mass media originates in those settings, that’s the worldview we hear on our radios and we see on our TV sets and on our movie screens. Much like Ancient Tyre, this materialistic, cosmopolitan, pluralist, sex-crazed culture is as hostile to the best interests of children as it is hostile to the claims of Christ.

And as our politicians have adopted such a worldview, the social pathologies of this post-Christian culture have been imposed on the rest of America – first preventing states from encouraging school children to worship God, then forcing states to allow abortion, the sacrifice of

children on the altar of prosperity, and now compelling states to celebrate and reward a form of behavior that bears no resemblance to God's plan for marriage.

And as these pathologies have spread, the victims have multiplied. And just as in Ancient Tyre, most of them are children. Since the Roe v. Wade decision, over 50 million Americans have never had the chance to be born. Today, around 40 percent of those who do manage to survive until birth have parents who aren't married – for black children, it's over 70 percent. And social scientists tell us that fatherless families are the single biggest cause of poverty for children. Children from such homes are also much more likely to use illicit drugs, to engage in pre-marital sex, to be involved in gang violence – there's hardly any social disorder that can't be linked in one way or another to the breakdown of the family.

In short, like this Syrophenician woman, our materialist, pluralist, sex-crazed, post Christian culture is, in large measure, getting what it has asked for. And like her demon-possessed daughter, it is still the children – both born and unborn – who are all too often the victims of their parents' callousness and cruelty.

So, let's look again at Jesus' startling response to this woman – maybe His startling comment has some basis in reality. For after all, He is not only a devotee of the only true religion in the world, not only a worshipper of the One and Only True God. He is in fact God Almighty.

For isn't that what our passage from Isaiah makes clear? As we saw last week, Jesus quotes from Isaiah 29 in His response to the hypocritical scribes and Pharisees, saying that they were teaching as doctrines the commandments of men. And in the rest of Mark chapter 7 and 8, Jesus goes on to act out the marvelous works that God says He will do in response to these corrupt leaders.

And that's what we see in today's passage: Jesus goes to Lebanon, the region of Tyre, and makes it a fertile field, the recipient of His gracious power. In the next passage in Mark, Jesus will heal a deaf man, just as Isaiah says in verse 18. And in the first passage in Mark chapter 8, Jesus will feed the 4000, fulfilling the words of Isaiah in verse 19 – “the afflicted also shall increase their gladness in the Lord, and the needy of mankind shall rejoice in the Holy One of Israel.”

For that's the point of all the miracles Jesus did, isn't it? He wasn't just showing the people that He was a powerful prophet. No, He was acting out the Word of God to prove that He is nothing less than the Holy One of Israel, the Divine Messiah.

So if that's Who Jesus is, the Son of God, why should He do any favors for a pagan, for someone who by definition has despised and rejected Him? Why should He pour out material blessings on someone who would just turn around and give the credit to Baal or Astoreth? Wouldn't blessing the pagans just be enabling their bad behavior?

So let's look again at Jesus' words, at how Jesus reacts to this pagan woman's request, for His words are clearly a test, aren't they? Not of her faith in His ability as a miracle worker, for she wouldn't have come to ask Him to heal her daughter if she hadn't recognized His power. No, it would be rather easy for a pluralist to admit that Jesus had some power – such as the power to heal – while still looking to other gods for other things, like money or happiness. No, just asking Jesus for a favor wouldn't necessarily be putting faith in Him.

And many non-Christians continue to do this today, don't they? Many homeless people are happy to go to the soup kitchens and clothes closets that urban churches provide, only to leave and

resume their lives of irresponsibility and drug abuse. Receiving material help from the Church is not the same as receiving Christ, is it?

And don't we who call ourselves Christians all too often do the same thing? Haven't we all, at one time or another, asked Jesus to get us out of the trouble that our own sinful behavior has caused? And after He has helped us, how often have we gone right back to our old sinful ways? In contrast, how often has our confession of sin been truly accompanied by repentance, by turning away from sin?

Yes, that's exactly why Jesus challenges this woman with such harsh words. For in order for her to accept the truth of his insulting statement about children and dogs, she would have to do more than just admit that Jesus had power. She would have to do more than admit that the God of the Jews was real. She would have to admit that the Jews were in fact the children, the chosen people of God and thus that all the things the prophets had said about them were true. She would also have to admit that in contrast her own people were dogs, that her own proud and wealthy culture was worthless and that her own religious traditions were phony – that the whole imposing cultural edifice the people of Tyre had built up was not to be respected, but to be looked down on, as people look down on the dogs to which they throw table scraps.

In other words, to accept Jesus' words, this pagan woman would have to reject her pagan faith. She would have to turn away from any hope she might have placed in money or sex to solve her problems. She would have to reject all her pride in her wealthy, cosmopolitan culture. She would have to reject pluralism, the idea that there are many gods, many different equally valid truth claims. In short, she would have to humble herself completely before Jesus and His God.

And that's what we Christians have to do as well, for there's only room for One God on the throne of our hearts. If we claim the name of Christ, we can't go on looking in more than one place for purpose and meaning and fulfillment in our lives. We can't worship Jesus for an hour on Sunday morning, and then worship our jobs or our families, our pleasures or our entertainments during the rest of the week. If God is our God, He must be God all the time – our only measure of truth, our only lawgiving King, the only One we follow, the only One to Whom all our heart, all our soul, all our mind, all our strength, all our love is given.

And if we can't look in the mirror and honestly tell ourselves that God is more important to us than anything else, if we can't say that we would choose Christ instead of all the material and relational blessings of this world, then we are no better than the post-Christian, sophisticated, sex-crazed pluralists we evangelicals love to despise. For in probing this Syrophenician woman with such a loaded, humiliating comment, that's exactly the choice Jesus was forcing her to make.

But the good news is that she did in fact make it. She listened to His humiliating words and completely humbled herself before Him. She not only rejected all her pride in her pagan culture. She not only accepted the superiority of the Jews as recipients of God's Old Testament promises. She acknowledged that she personally didn't deserve anything from Jesus, and she didn't even ask for the table scraps. Instead, her faith, her trust in Jesus was so profound that she was convinced that just some crumbs that might have been accidentally dropped from His table would be enough to bring healing into her daughter's life. And in all His power, in all His grace, Jesus rewarded her faith.

And if that's where you are today, you can have the same hope. If you truly repent, turning away from yourself and from anyone or anything else to which you might be looking for hope and help and healing, if you have given up any efforts to solve your own spiritual condition and instead

look to Christ alone as your Savior, and if you have truly bowed the knee to Christ, acknowledging Him as Lord every hour and every day of every area of your life, you can have the same assurance. For the same God Who cast out the unclean spirit from this undeserving pagan woman's daughter, is the same God Who pours His Holy Spirit into the hearts of undeserving sinners today. Let us draw near to Him.