

“Jesus is for the Dogs”  
 Proper 18B (September 9, 2018)  
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>>Put a hand on our shoulder and point us in the right direction. Put *our* hand on someone’s shoulder and let it matter. Amen<<

One perk of my job is that members and friends of our church pass me things to read; some of this material finds its way into sermons. Such is the case today. Not all of this gifted reading material is serious. For example, one of you sent me an email a few weeks ago filled with church humor cartoons. One of those cartoons was a picture of Noah getting drenched with rain waiting for two snails to make their way up the ramp into the ark. “Take your time,” says a sarcastic Noah. Another was a picture of three women riding donkeys. Each donkey had a bumper sticker above its tail. One read, “Our son is an honor student.” Another read, “Our son is in medical school.” And on the third donkey - Mary and Joseph’s donkey - the bumper sticker above the tail read, “Our son is God.”

Last week a member of our congregation handed me a cartoon with a series of pictures of Jesus based on stories from the gospels. Each picture is a scene depicting Jesus doing different things. The pictures are - if you will - different “versions” of Jesus plucked from the gospels. In one picture there’s Jesus the preacher standing atop a mountain saying, “blessed are the meek,” and “turn the other cheek,” and “you’ll find if you seek.” In another, there’s Jesus the “furious thunderer” pointing angrily at the Pharisees, saying, “woe unto you, you hypocrites.” There’s Rabbi Jesus in another picture, debating with other rabbis over a fine point of Jewish law. There’s visionary Jesus in another frame, holding a tiny mustard seed between two fingers and looking up to heaven while saying, “the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed.” There’s Jesus the iconoclast, challenging ancient biblical laws about purity; and Jesus the medical man casting out demons; and there’s even, says the cartoon, Jesus “the comm[unist]” telling his audience that it’s easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven.” Not included in that cartoon are other images of Jesus from the gospels - images, such as, apocalyptic Jesus warning of the end of the world; disturber of the peace Jesus, toppling tables of money changers in the temple; sacrificial Jesus dying on a cross; Jesus the sage, teaching about religious wisdom; Easter Jesus appearing in various forms to his disciples. The Jesus of the gospels wears many different hats - preacher, healer, sage, activist, loving example, the list goes on and on. Jesus, as theologian G. K. Chesterton once put it, is a “tremendous figure [who] fills the Gospels.”<sup>1</sup>

But then there’s today’s story from Mark’s gospel, which depicts Jesus in a less than flattering guise; we might call this Jesus “Rude Jesus.” In the story we heard a moment ago, Mark the gospel writer sets the stage for this rudeness by pointing out that Jesus was visiting the region of Tyre - a gentile region north of Nazareth in what is modern day Lebanon. While there Jesus is approached, as he so often is in the gospels, by someone in need. The approaching woman is of Syrophenician origin - a “Gentile,” writes Mark. This unnamed Syrophenician woman dropped to her knees and began begging Jesus to heal her daughter, whom she said was possessed by an evil spirit. Demon possession in antiquity was an umbrella phrase that could include any number of physical or mental afflictions. This

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from the thundering end of his book *Orthodoxy*, and quoted in full here:  
<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/108711-and-as-i-close-this-chaotic-volume-i-open-again>

Syrophoenician woman meets Jesus, and kneels and begs as so many others do in Mark's gospel when seeking relief. Earlier in Mark's gospel, a man with a skin disease also dropped to his knees before Jesus and begged for healing. Elsewhere in Mark's gospel, a synagogue leader named Jairus fell to his knees and begged Jesus to heal his daughter. And in the very next story in Mark after the story of the Syrophoenician woman, a man with hearing loss and difficulties with speech is brought before Jesus, and the man's friends "begged" Jesus to heal him. In every one of these stories, Jesus heals the person with the ailment immediately. And, in some healing stories, it says that Jesus healed because he was "moved with pity" - filled with compassion for the hurting person.

But today's story is different. Not only does Jesus *not* heal immediately, he's actually rude to the Syrophoenician woman, calling her a "dog" - a racial epithet in the ancient world - dismissing her as unworthy because of her ethnicity to receive the grace of healing. "It's not fair," says Jesus to the begging woman, "to take the food of [God's] children [i.e., healing] and throw it to the dogs [i.e., people like you]." In his book titled *The Bad Jesus*, New Testament scholar Hector Avalos says Jesus seems "abusive" in this story - a story, says Avalos, that "makes Jesus look uncompassionate, ethnocentric, and misogynistic."<sup>2</sup> Feminist scholars have long struggled to make sense of this story in Mark. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, back in 1895, called Jesus' response to the Syrophoenician woman "ungracious." Sharon Ringe wrote that calling the Syrophoenician woman a "dog" was "insulting in the extreme." And Ranjini Rebera writes that Jesus in this story "does not fit the inherited image we have of him as the 'kind, understanding, ever-helpful savior'."<sup>3</sup> One British scholar, who tends to be restrained in his language, said that Jesus in this story is "certainly not diplomatic."<sup>4</sup> When I was in seminary, a friend of mine found me in the library one afternoon, and complained that his preaching professor had assigned this story from Mark for each person in the class to write a sermon on. "I don't know what to do with this story," said my exasperated friend. "I'm thinking of titling my sermon 'Rude Jesus'."

Yes, Jesus doesn't come off well in today's story. And Mark doesn't even try to soften the impact of what Jesus says to this begging woman. Mark doesn't insert some explanatory phrase like, "Jesus said this on purpose to test her faith." There's nothing like this - there's nothing to make Jesus' apparent rudeness in this story easier for us - the humble readers of Mark's gospel - to swallow.

In an article titled "The Age of Rudeness" in *The New York Times Magazine*, Rachel Cusk tells a series of personal stories about her experience of rudeness in modern society.<sup>5</sup> In one story, Cusk is going through airport security, and encounters, in her words, a "uniformed woman ... [who] bangs the gray plastic trays one after another onto the conveyor belt with a violence that seems to be a request for attention. At every opportunity," Cusk continues, "[the uniformed woman] makes it clear that she has relinquished self-control: Her nature has been let loose, like an animal from its cage. She abuses, without exception, every person who passes along her queue, while seeming not to address any single one of them: We are no longer individuals; we are a herd enduring the ... lash, heads down and silent. ... The person

<sup>2</sup> Hector Avalos, *The Bad Jesus: The Ethics of New Testament Ethics* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix, 2015), 235.

<sup>3</sup> All quoted in Avalos, *The Bad Jesus*, 236-237.

<sup>4</sup> R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 298.

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[https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/15/magazine/the-age-of-rudeness.html?rref=collection%2Fsectioncollection%2Fmagazine&action=click&contentCollection=magazine&region=rank&module=package&version=highlights&contentPlacement=9&pgtype=sectionfront&\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/15/magazine/the-age-of-rudeness.html?rref=collection%2Fsectioncollection%2Fmagazine&action=click&contentCollection=magazine&region=rank&module=package&version=highlights&contentPlacement=9&pgtype=sectionfront&_r=0)

in front of me in the queue is a [woman traveling with a child] ... . She has put two large clear bags of cosmetics and creams in her tray, but this, apparently, is not allowed; she is permitted only a single bag. The uniformed woman halts the queue and slowly and deliberately holds up the two bags, looking fixedly at their owner. ‘What’s this then?’ she says. ‘What’s this about?’ The woman explains that because two of them are traveling, she has assumed that they are entitled to two bags. Her voice is quiet and polite. The little girl gazes ahead with wide, unblinking eyes. ‘You assumed wrong,’ the uniformed woman says. Her horrible relish for the situation is apparent. She has been waiting, it is clear, to fasten on someone and has found her victim. ‘You don’t get away with that,’ she says, grimacing and shaking her head. ‘Where do people like you get your ideas from?’ The rest of us watch while she makes the woman unpack the bags and then decide which of her possessions are to be thrown away. ... No one intervenes. I do not [say to the uniformed woman] that there is no need to be rude. Instead, as I increasingly seem to in such situations these days, I wonder what Jesus would have done. My traveling companion - a painter - is the politest person I know, but ... he dislikes conflict. When it is our turn in the queue, the uniformed woman stares at the bag he has placed in the tray. It contains his tubes of paint. They are crumpled and bespattered with use, and there are so many of them that the bag can’t close at the top. She folds her arms. ‘What are those,’ she says. ‘They’re paints,’ he replies. ‘You can’t take those through,’ she says. ‘Why not,’ he asks pleasantly. ‘The bag has to close at the top,’ she says. ‘That’s why not.’ ‘But I need them to paint with,’ he says. ‘You can’t take them through,’ she says. He looks at her in silence. He is looking directly into her eyes. He stands completely quiet and still. The look goes on for a very long time. ... During those seconds, it seems as if layers of her are being removed: She is being simplified, put in order, by being looked at. He is giving her his full attention, and I watch the strange transformation occur. Finally he speaks. ‘What do you suggest I do,’ he says, very calmly. ‘Well, sir,’ she says, ‘if you’re traveling with this lady, she might have room in her bag.’ Neither of them looks at me - they are still looking at each other. ‘Would that be acceptable?’ she says. ‘Yes,’ he says, ‘I don’t see why not.’ I proffer my bag, and the woman herself transfers the paints from one bag to the other. Her hands labor to do it with care and exactitude: It takes her a long time. Finally she seals the bag and lays it gently back in the tray. ‘Is that all right, sir?’ she says. Now that he has won this victory,” writes Rachel Cusk, “I want him to use it to reprimand her ... for all the wrongs [of] her behavior ... ; for the fact that it’s safer to be him [a man in the world], and always has been. He does not reprimand her. He smiles at her politely. ‘Thank you very much,’ he says. ‘It would have been a shame to throw them away, wouldn’t it?’ she says. ‘Yes, it would,’ he says. ‘I appreciate your help.’ ‘I hope you enjoy your holiday, sir,’ she says.” Cusk concludes the story with this piece of advice: “If we are polite to rude people, perhaps we give them back *their* dignity ... .”

Reflecting on this story makes me think differently about the story of Jesus and the Syrophenician woman. It makes me think that maybe we’re focusing on the wrong character in the story when we wrestle with Jesus’ rudeness. Jesus is often brutally provocative in the gospels - saying and doing things that grab attention: he can rail at hypocrites; he can, and does, throw his arms up in disgust at the disciples’ lack of faith; he weeps as a mother does for wayward children when gazing at his beloved temple in Jerusalem, and then foretells its doom; he speaks with biting irony to the Herods and the Pontius Pilates and the sundry religious elites of his world; and clearly, as in today’s story from Mark, Jesus is capable of a bit of rudeness. But as in Rachel Cusk’s story, so also in Mark’s, maybe it’s not the rudeness that should draw attention, but how that rudeness is

transformed. The painter looked into the eyes of the uniformed officer, writes Cusk, and “layers of her [were] removed”; she was “transformed.” And the Syrophenician woman floored Jesus with her response. She dug in her heels, and used his own words against him. He said to her, “It’s not fair to take the food of [God’s] children [i.e., healing] and throw it to the dogs [i.e., people like you].” But she looked him in the eyes and said politely but directly, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” Her response to Jesus is not a call for civility - civility as Martin Luther King Jr. knew too well could be an excuse to drag feet instead of driving the wheel of justice forward. No, this woman isn’t asking for Jesus to be civil. She’s demanding dignity - dignity like that painter in airport security. The look-me-in-the-eyes kind of dignity. The I’m-a-human-being-and-you-will-treat-me-as-one kind of dignity. Dignity that belongs to every human being as a child of God, created in God’s image - precious children who deserve a plate and a big helping and a seat at the table instead of the crumbs that litter the floor below it. It’s dignity that is the birthright of all people regardless of where they come from or who they love. It’s the dignity that is the birthright of all the world’s “Syrophenicians”: those crossing our southern border looking for a safer life; those little children who’ve been separated from their parents; the Syrophenician homeless who live in our town or who skip meals each week to stretch a paycheck; the Syrophenicians who work in our offices and get bullied by the boss; or that Syrophenician uncle of ours with the half-baked political views. They’re all children of God deserving more than mere crumbs.

The Syrophenician woman in Mark’s story politely demands her dignity, and Jesus is snapped out of his momentary rudeness. He heals her daughter immediately; and in so doing, maybe he, like the uniformed woman in airport security, is transformed by the encounter.

Rachel Cusk concludes her article in *The New York Times Magazine* with these words: “I have made a resolution, which is to be more polite. I don’t know what good it will do: This might be a dangerous time for politeness. It might involve sacrifices. ... As one who has never been tested,” she says, “who has never endured famine or war or extremism or even discrimination, and who therefore perhaps does not know whether she is true or false, brave or a coward, selfless or self-serving, righteous or misled, it would be good to have something to navigate by.” Amen.