

There really is no getting around that fact that calling someone a dog is an insult. But that's exactly what Jesus did. The gospel text contains stories of two healings. But it's hard not to get distracted by the words Jesus used in response to a woman's request for help in the first story: ". . . it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." There's just no way to put a good spin on that. Some have tried to soften it by saying that the form of the word "dog" could be translated "little dogs" or "house dogs," implying a term of endearment rather than an insult. But I don't buy it. I think we have to accept that it was, in fact, a derogatory term commonly used at the time for describing all gentiles.

And this kind of name-calling is not foreign to us. Calling someone a "dog" might seem pretty mild when we think of the names we hear given to those who are different from us. The problem is that in this case it's Jesus doing the name-calling. Although it would not have been unexpected in that time or place. This incident takes place in Tyre, southern Lebanon, so this woman was of a different ethnic groups as well as a different religious group.

By approaching Jesus, she violated a number of Jewish conventions, including touching him. Being touched by an "unclean" Gentile woman would have been a problem for any Jewish male. Also, the region of Tyre was economically affluent and one could argue that Jesus' comments reflect the resentment typically felt by the underprivileged toward the privileged classes, as in this paraphrase of Jesus' words: "Let the poor people in the hinterland be satisfied first for once. It is not good to take the bread of the poor people and throw it to the rich heathens in the city."

So borders and boundaries of several kinds are being crossed here: gender, religion, class, ethnicity. Jesus does end up doing the healing, but something else happens in the process. This uppity foreign woman causes Jesus to see things in a new way. We might even say that a healing takes place in Jesus, that his heart and mind were "opened up" by the witness of this woman.

It might be a jolt to our system to think of Jesus in this way – as having to struggle with the conditionings of his culture, of needing to have an attitude adjustment about certain kinds of people.

In other words, we don't think of Jesus as an "ist" – a religious/ethnic exclusivist, a sexist, even a racist - even though in all these isms, he was perfectly within the norms of his culture and religion. Still, it doesn't sound like Jesus, does it? Maybe, as someone suggests, he was caught in a moment when his compassion was down and he responded in a thoughtless manner. Haven't we all been there and said things we wished we could take back?

And doesn't this give us a unique insight into the full humanity of Jesus. Instead of diminishing the personhood of Jesus, this actually can give us a greater sense of connection to him when we think of our times of compassion fatigue or our careless words or actions. To think that even Jesus could be opened up to new horizons, in unexpected ways, by unexpected people – then we can be opened up too. And if Jesus' mind could be changed about who is out/ who is in, then our minds can be changed too.

But this also gives us insight into the divinity of Jesus. This change of heart and mind really shouldn't surprise us. The Old Testament relates many stories, not only of human beings arguing with God but also of God's agreement with such arguments. A classic example is Abraham's negotiations with God regarding the fate of Sodom in Genesis. When God threatens to destroy the city . . .

Abraham: Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it?

God: If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake.

A: Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. Suppose five of the fifty are lacking? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?

G: I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there.

A: Suppose forty are found there?

G: For the sake of forty I will not do it.

A: Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak. Suppose thirty are found there?

G: I will not do it, if I find thirty there.

A: Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there?

G: For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it.

A: Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak just once more. Suppose ten are found there?

G: For the sake of ten I will not destroy it.

So as problematic as the designation of Gentiles as “dogs” remains, the image of Jesus, on behalf of God, changing his mind in the face of the contingencies of human history and the depth of human need, does not have to be so difficult for us to understand. And when we do, then we can get down to thinking about how we respond when we are confronted by our cultural, ethnic, or religious assumptions, when we are challenged to rethink our criteria for who is out and who is in.

Both the readings from Proverbs and James are crystal clear on who is in. Proverbs reminds us that God is God of both the privileged and the poor and insists on an end to economic oppression of those “afflicted at the gate.” And James says that “. . . if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.” We Lutherans sometimes give James short shrift because of this passage, which ends with the statement “So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.” But there is no dichotomy between faith and works. When we talk about faith alone or grace alone, we do not mean to say that there is no subsequent response to that grace such as changes in our thinking and behavior.

I don’t think that any follower of Jesus would argue that we are not called to promote justice for all people. The difficulties arise when we must ask ourselves: who are those afflicted at our gate; who are the “others” who challenge our assumptions about the limits to our compassion; who do we still struggle to accept; where do our minds and hearts need to be transformed?

It doesn’t take much thought to see how these texts address our world today. With fingers pointing all around at reasons for our economic crisis, we see the plight of the poor, the foreclosed, the unemployed, the underemployed. With the gap between rich and poor ever-widening, we see systemic intransigence of corporate greed. With the struggle to even have a rational discussion about health care for all, let alone providing for it we see the power of the status quo. You know, in light of health care, when we see Jesus trying to deny healing to the Syro-Phoenician woman’s daughter, we could say that Jesus is acting as an HMO. His initial response is: Coverage Denied. How’s that for a terrible image? But Jesus had a conversion experience. And we too are called to pay attention to those “afflicted at the gate” and to make sure that their voices are heard and their needs are met. Not just in our charity, but also in our work for change.

It's often said that religion and politics don't mix. And to be sure, the health care debate is one big political ball of wax. But as liberation theologian Leonardo Boff said: "Jesus Christ ... is not only the Lord of small places like the heart, the soul, the church; he is the cosmic Lord of large spaces like politics." As followers of Jesus we must get beyond our own prejudices, assumptions, cultural conditionings, and sometimes even some of our religious teachings – to allow our hearts and minds to be opened by those who are different from us. And to carry it into the political arena.

Of course there are church politics too. It doesn't take much thought to see how the gospel addresses our church today. The votes of the ELCA Churchwide Assembly concerning the place of lgbt people in the Lutheran Church have opened up a new space for many people. For lgbt clergy, there is a new day of being included, rather than excluded.

And for those who are upset with that decision, I would hope that they might see their lgbt sisters and brothers as the Syro-Phoenician woman challenging them to open their hearts and minds to a new possibility, to see the image of Jesus rethinking the criteria for who is out and who is in, and changing his mind in the face of the contingencies of human history and the depth of human need.

But the fact is that we all have a problem with somebody or with some group. We all struggle with the conditionings of his culture and need an attitude adjustment about certain kinds of people. That's just a fact of human life. But we need to examine our hearts, identify our prejudices and fears, move beyond them, and work for their liberation and well-being, not because of any political agenda of the right or left, but because we're called to imitate the character of God. It is our call as followers of Jesus – who discovered that the gospel has gone to the dogs (as a dog lover, I mean that in the most positive way), that the circle of God's love includes those once considered outsiders. And that includes us. We are some of the dogs who have received the good news of the gospel. And we have good news to share.

Amen