The Woman of Tyre

Mark 7:24-30

St. Augustine of Canterbury, Wiesbaden

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The Rt. Rev. Pierre W. Whalon

Today’s Gospel has us meet a remarkable Gentile woman, and a Jesus who seems uncaring and insulting.

Jesus leaves the land of Israel, apparently needing a rest. You can’t do your work for your boss, never mind for God, if you never rest. So even the Son of God takes a break. Mark tells us he didn’t want anyone to know where he was, just like any celebrity. So he goes and hides in enemy territory, in the city of Tyre, founded by the Phoenicians and which still exists in what is now Lebanon.

If you’re a famous person, and need to get away from it all, hide where no one will look for you. For Jesus that is among the Gentiles.

One of Mark’s favorite themes is that the more Jesus tells people not to talk about him, the more they do so. And even hiding among the Gentiles, he’s found out.

A mother, deeply distressed by her daughter’s illness (we’re not told what it is other than demonic oppression), “outs” Jesus. She finds him and starts to beg him to heal her daughter. If you had a sick child and you knew that there was a famous doctor vacationing in town who could cure her, what would you do?

And then comes this reply: “First let the children eat all they want,” he told her, “for it is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.”

Huh? What? What children? What bread? What dogs? We can’t but wince at this seemingly heartless answer. In medieval illuminations of this scene, you see the woman on her knees, begging, and Jesus has his back turned to her. Is he calling her a dog? And her little girl too?

There has been an ocean of ink spilled trying to explain this. Since the woman replies to him, in magisterial fashion, that even dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the children’s table, the first thought is that she corrects him. Jesus is wrong, he’s narrow-minded, and he needs a come-uppance.

Nothing fundamentally wrong with this picture, from a doctrinal point of view. We believe that Jesus Christ is both fully human and fully divine. It’s the quantum physics of the Bible: you know, if you look at a particle one way, it’s a particle, if you look another way, it’s a wave, and they’re both true.

So we can look at Jesus and see a human being, who like us makes mistakes, like saying that mustard seeds are the smallest seeds of all, whe they’re not. He also gets angry and tired, and has a sense of humor. He’s only human. Or we can look at Jesus and see God with us, who shares our life here that we might share God’s life with him. Both are true—call it quantum theology.

But I think there is something else here. She wants something from him. She’s outed him, so to speak, disturbed his much-needed vacation, in the belief that Jesus can heal her sick child. He says, “First let the children eat all they want,” in other words, the mission to Israel has to be accomplished, before his mission can go beyond the borders of Israel. The woman of Tyre understands what he is saying, but she’s not going to wait: we need you now. My daughter needs you now. And though you Jews call us “dogs”, you came to vacation among us. God’s work can’t wait. Crumbs fall the table when kids eat, and the dogs eat them, especially when children are always slipping something to their dog.

Do you see? What she is saying is not only for Jesus’ ears, but those disciples with him. (They are not mentioned but I think two or three accompanied him.) These words are for all of us. The Spirit of God is saying through the mother of Tyre that there is no putting off God’s work with distinctions among people. St Paul summed it up to the Galatians: “In Christ there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female.” So get on with it!

Jesus replies, seemingly amazed, “Because you have said this, you can go. The demon has left your daughter.” And it did.

Afterwards, Jesus leaves Tyre and returns to Israel. Did he need this correction? Maybe. But more importantly, we are being told that God’s work is not to be put off for any reason. Now is the time. There is no better time, no more propitious moment.

Today we are confirming Colin. He will proclaim that like all the faithful, he has rejected evil and place his trust in the gift of Jesus in his life, and he is proclaiming that not only to this congregation and bishop, but to the whole communion of saints, including that faithful woman of Tyre. And we will pray that God’s Spirit will strengthen him for the same kind of work that she did, the prayer of intercession for another, the proclaiming of the Good News of God’s love for us in Christ. Strength to do the work that only Colin can do in the mission of God in creation. And we will promise God, and Colin, to uphold him in his life in Christ.

So Colin, and all of you, my friends, there is no time like now. The work of God that you and I are called to do individually and together will not wait. People are outside those doors who are sick, who have lost hope, who are dying. So let’s get on with it.