

Rev. Dr. Niveen Sarras
Mark 7:24-37
September 9, 2019

My family enjoys having dinner in our backyard surrounded by trees, vegetables, cats, and dogs. My father shares his food with the cats and dogs. Every time he eats in the garden, cats and dogs surround him asking for food. Those cats and dogs are not pets, but wild animals and my father loves to feed them. Palestinians have different social and cultural perspectives of dogs. They are not pets. We do not have special food for them. They eat the same food we eat. They eat under our table.

To call a person a dog is a great insult in my culture. Jesus insults the Syrophenician woman by referring to her as a dog. The Jews did not consider dogs as pets but unclean and wild animals. They also referred to Gentiles as dogs. This Gentile woman asks Jesus to heal her daughter. Jesus' response seems offensive and shocking, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs" (v. 27). Jesus means by children, Israel, and dogs, the Gentiles. Some scholars try to soften Jesus harsh response by arguing that Jesus referred to the Gentile woman as "little puppies" not as farm dog.¹ I do not think that this interpretation can soften Jesus' statement. To call a person a puppy or a big dog is a great insult in my culture and the Jewish culture.

¹ To varying degrees, see Taylor, Mark, 350; Cranfield, Mark, 248; Lane, Mark, 262; D. Rhoads, "Jesus and the Syrophenician Woman," in Rhoads, Reading Mark, 78; Strauss, Mark L.; Strauss, Mark L.. Mark (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament) (Kindle Locations 8228-8229). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

Jesus asserts that he came for the Jews first. The Israelites supposed to be a light of the revelation to the nations (Isaiah 42:6). But this Gentile mother did not give up. Her “clever response catches him [Jesus] off guard and impresses him so much he grants her wish.”²

The Gentile woman expresses a persistent faith in Jesus. She believes that “the salvation of the Jews means blessings for the Gentiles (Gen 12: 3). The dogs will be fed, meaning the Gentiles will receive a share in God’s salvation.”³ Her response to Jesus demonstrates that salvation of the Gentiles is already/not yet part of the Kingdom of God. “It is doubly surprising that [Jesus] he is defeated not by a learned rabbi, but by a Gentile and a woman, two strikes that in rabbinic Judaism would disqualify her from having any spiritual insight.”⁴

The evangelist Mark affirms that the Gentiles are part of God’s salvation. Jesus went to Lebanon, to the Gentiles territories to declare that the Gentiles are now equal to the Jews and Jesus’ ministry is inclusive. It is for Jews and Gentiles, women and men. What does this story tell us as we are joining the ELCA churches across the country in a day of service “God’s work. Our hands” Sunday?

Jesus ministry is inclusive, and our ministry at Immanuel is also inclusive. We do not only serve ourselves but also serve our community and the world. Social concern committee organized the Tower of Love where we donated canned meats to share with Neighbor Place.

² Strauss, Mark L.; Strauss, Mark L.. Mark (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament) (Kindle Locations 8108-8109). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.” (8104).

³ Ibid., 8127-8128.

⁴ Ibid., 8160.

The quilt group worked for several months to prepare 34 quilts. They are going to share them to those who are in need overseas. The women of the church encouraged you to donate school supplies. So many more activities are part of this special day at our church.

I encourage you to participate in packing school supplies, canned meats, and to participate in signing letters to our senators and members of Congress to advocate for Native Americans rights to have ballot boxes on their reservations to make it easier for them to vote.

we are in communion with one another, and with our neighbor who depends on Community Meal to survive. We are also in communion with our neighbors overseas who cannot provide school supplies or warm quilts for their children. Jesus moved from Galilee, the home of the Jews to go to Lebanon to minister to the Gentiles. Today, we are acting like our Lord Jesus by expanding our ministry outside our territory. God did not create us to live for ourselves but as the Apostle Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:15 “And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.” Immanuel's ministry is inclusive because God created us for community. We are responsible for taking care of each other. We live for the Lord Jesus Christ who died for us by being Christ to those who are in need.