

Yes, But

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“Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.” – Mark 7:28

You and I and other Christians, two thousand years after the historical Jesus, live with what theologians call a high Christology. What that means is that our identification of Jesus as the Christ makes him part of the godhead. When we say, as a church sign says just a few blocks from here on Wilson Mills Road, that “Jesus is Lord,” we're essentially saying, “Jesus is God.” That's what high Christology means.

Our gospel reading from Mark this morning should give us pause as we blithely go about proclaiming Jesus as God. Jesus doesn't look much like God in his encounter with the mother from Phoenicia, which was just north of Galilee, where Jesus came from. He looks a bit provincial, in fact, as he initially refuses to heal her daughter because he says his mission first is to his own people, the Jews.

He makes that point by quoting what looks to be some sort of aphorism – “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs,” – but biblical scholars have searched high and low through ancient literature and they haven't been able to find anyone else using those words to make a comparison between two groups of people. Maybe Jesus made it up on the spot, but if he did, he certainly chose his words poorly because that way of putting things puts the Jewish people in the role of the children and the woman and her daughter in the role of the dogs, and nobody wants to be compared to a dog.

Imagine how that mother must have felt when Jesus came out with that response after she'd begged him to heal her little girl:

“Who you calling a dog, mister?” she might have said. “I ain't no dog. My daughter ain't no dog. Her father ain't no dog. We're not your dog, we're not her dog, we're not nobody's dog. Who you callin' a dog?”

That's how that mother might have responded to Jesus' comparison, and if she had, she would have been perfectly within her human rights to do so. She would have had every right to take offense at an odious comparison. She would have had every right to tell Jesus where to off-load that superior, condescending attitude of his and act more like a *mensch*, which is a Yiddish word meaning a person of integrity and honor – a stand-up sort of guy, we might say today.

Jesus initially responds to this woman's request from a zero-sum perspective. That is to say, since resources are limited, my task is to take care of these people and you'll have to manage on your own. There isn't enough of me to around, so good luck finding your own healer.

That's zero-sum thinking, and that's how Jesus initially responds to this woman. And who knows how many people Jesus responded to with that kind of thinking. The gospels don't tell us every detail about Jesus' interactions with others, but they do preserve this one, and it's incredibly important for us that they did, because this woman corrects Jesus' thinking.

And she does so not by getting in his face and telling him where to stick his misconception but rather by engaging in a bit of conceptual jujitsu. She takes Jesus' ideas and words and she pivots them against him and to her advantage: "But she answered him, 'Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.'"

Okay, she says, maybe you're right, but if so, you're only half right because there's more to the story than your response indicates. You're not looking at the whole picture. You're not seeing things from a broader perspective. Reality is richer than you're making it. I'm entitled to more than you're indicating because there's more to go around than you're suggesting. You can feed the children – give them the share that they're entitled to – but that won't exhaust all the good there is. And what good is left we're entitled to. That good that falls from the children's table shouldn't go to waste because you don't recognize the full ramifications of your own mission.

That's a lot of words to paraphrase what this woman says with devastating effect. She catches Jesus off guard by first agreeing with him but then by taking his heart and his mind to a different, better place. She doesn't let Jesus get away with a limited perspective. She pushes him, using his own way of thinking, into that more abundant life that he himself promised to bring. This Gentile mother makes Jesus live up to his own teachings. She makes him walk the walk of divine abundance and not simply talk the talk of how great and loving God is. Sometimes you have to say to God, "Yes, but," in order to get at the level where genuine faith is true.

And Jesus recognizes that. It takes him a moment – Mark doesn't say how long Jesus remained silent after the woman's response – but he does make it clear that it was the woman's response that changed his mind: "Then he said to her, 'For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter.'"

This woman's push-back brought the healing she sought for her daughter. She didn't take Jesus' initial no for an answer. She didn't simply accept what this wonder-working teacher and healer told her. She challenged Jesus – God incarnate, as the church would later declare – to go beyond the usual limits.

And sometimes that's the best way to handle God – with a challenge. Sometimes, like Job, we have to shake our fists at God and say, Whatever I did, I don't deserve this. Sometimes, like Abraham, we have to say to God, Will you indeed destroy the righteous with the wicked? Sometimes, like that Syrophenician mother, we have to say to God, Yes, but.

This is about discerning God's will. When people say to me, as they sometimes do, that there are no accidents or that everything happens for a reason, I always get just a little bit edgy and want to remind them that there is such a thing as God's will and there are many things that aren't.

I don't, for example, believe that legal segregation in the American south was God's will, and Martin Luther King didn't either, and he stood up and said so.

Martin Luther didn't think that a corrupted church was God's will, and he stood up and said so.

And Jesus didn't think that his own religious contemporaries were living up to their own faith – living up to the standards of God's will – and so he said so.

James Baldwin wrote in *Giovanni's Room*, "People can't, unhappily, invent their mooring posts, their lovers and their friends, any more than they can invent their parents. Life gives these and also takes them away, and the great difficulty is to say Yes to life."

Or, as that Syrophenician mother said, Yes, but. Yes, your mission may be to your own people, but that doesn't mean that we get left out. Yes, we'll always have the poor with us, but that doesn't mean that we shouldn't try to both help them and also work to bring about conditions that make

poverty less likely. Yes, we all have to die but that doesn't mean that death defines who we are and how we will live our lives.

That's the Christian message – Yes, but. Yes, sin abounds in the world, as Paul said, but grace abounds much more. Yes, the forces of evil have their way again and again in history, but God's word will be the last word when history is no more. Yes, you can have the life you're living right now, but you've been promised a better life if you'll only accept the invitation to live it.

Yes, but. That's the way life works. Yes, but. That's the promise of the gospel. Yes, but. That's the faith of people prepared to push back for the sake of something better.