

“Could even Jesus be racist?”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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*James 2:1-10 and Mark 7:24-30*

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Wait. What? This can't be right.

A woman of different ethnicity comes to our kind, loving Savior and asks him to heal her daughter. We don't even need to read further. We know how he's going to respond. This is Jesus! He's going to look her in the eyes, call her by name, and heal her daughter. She is going to feel seen and loved more than she ever has before.

But that's not what happens. Our sweet Savior replies by calling her a dog and refusing to help. Is it possible? He's supposed to be the incarnation of God, perfect and sinless, bringing good news to all. What happened?

To find out, let's rewind. Will you come with me? I've got a story to tell you, and if you stay to the end, it might change how you see both Jesus and yourself.

Picture a young man, hands calloused from carpentry, his skin brown and kissed by the sun, his clothes homespun, and his eyes—there's something bright and eager about them. Jesus has started his ministry with a bang. He's been preaching, calling disciples, healing people, feeding the hungry, even resisting the temptations of evil in the wilderness. He's stood up to the religious authorities, calling them hypocrites, telling them it's not what's outside that can hurt us; it's what's inside—pride, hate, envy, deception—these are the real threats.

Now, he's tired. Just for a night, he wants a break. He goes to one of the oldest cities in the world. Founded by Phoenicians, and located on the coast, Tyre is a rich, booming city of commerce. It's also an age-long enemy of the Israelites. There are Jews living there, but they tend to be poor day-laborers, serving the land-owning Tyrians. Why he goes there, we don't know; maybe he thinks he can pass unnoticed.

If so, he is mistaken, for in Tyre, there is a woman who has heard about Jesus. She's heard about all the love and hope he has given so many people. And she could really use some hope right now. For years, she has watched her daughter get sicker and sicker. No one ever invites them to dinner; no one wants to be her daughter's friend. People cross to the other side when they see them. She sees the pain, and the loneliness, eating away at her baby girl, and it makes her so mad, because there's nothing she can do about it. But now Jesus, the Messiah, has come. So, she goes to him. She knows she shouldn't. She's a woman, unaccompanied by a man. She's a Gentile. She's Greek and Syrophenician. The text doesn't even bother to tell her name, but it is sure to tell us that she isn't supposed to be there. She's too different.

This isn't racism as we know it, based on skin color. This is racism based on ethnicity. It's tribe and nation, and if you belong to the "wrong" one, to one that isn't mine, you are the enemy. Throw in patriarchy, a history of enmity, and socio-economic differences, then everything is wrong about this woman. But she comes anyway, because she's a mother.

She marches into that house, drops to the ground, and begs him: *Save my daughter. Tell me that her life matters too.*

This is the moment we expect the kingdom of God to break into the world and rip down its false barriers. Instead, we just get more of the world. And we get it from the person we least expect: Jesus. He replies with an ethnic slur, calling her a dog, saying he didn't come for her kind; he came for his people, the true and only children of God.

Confronted by such an un-Jesus-like response, some scholars have argued that Jesus is simply testing the Syrophenician woman, hoping she'll prove her faith and challenge the assumptions of those around them. The problem is the text doesn't say he's testing her, nor does Jesus ever test anyone like this in the Gospel of Mark.<sup>1</sup> I side with Jessica Vazquez Torres<sup>2</sup> who says, "The other explanation, the one I adhere to, suggests that Jesus is being a jerk," who in his full humanity "allows his social, class, religious, and gender conditioning to come barging into the scene."

Yes, Jesus is supposed to be fully divine and sinless. But he is also supposed to be fully human, and to be fully human is to be shaped by the culture around us, its attitudes, its prejudices and biases, often in ways we don't perceive, want, or choose. It's also to get tired, impatient, angry, and reactive; the Gospels frequently show this side of Jesus. (That poor fig tree!) Jesus, after all, can only redeem our full humanity if he experiences our full humanity.

I think we don't want to admit this about Jesus, because we don't want to admit this about ourselves. I certainly don't. Jessica Vazquez Torres says, "I am disappointed by Jesus, the clumsy humanity that comes barreling out of him... because he reminds me of me. I feel revealed."

How often do we make snap judgments, perpetuate stereotypes, and perform acts of exclusion or othering (sometimes without even knowing it)? How often do we turn people in need away just because they are the "wrong" people? How often do our words and actions not match our intent?

Whether we chose it or not, racism and all the other -isms are a part of us. A part of me. A part of you. A part, apparently, even of Jesus.

It's at this point in our story that the Syrophenician woman pauses, still feeling the red-hot pain of Jesus' verbal slap. She thinks, "Of course," and is tempted to get up and walk away, resigned to a world without Messiahs, a world without God's justice or love. But then the image of her daughter flashes before her eyes, and she says, "No. Not again. Not this time." She stands up. She looks this man in his eyes, and she says, with all the "sass and defiance, passion and

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<sup>1</sup> David Lose, "What the Syrophenician Woman Teaches" (August 31, 2015)

<sup>2</sup> Preaching during the national Presbyterian Week of Action's LGBTQIA+ Resilience Service (August 25, 2021)

courage, grief and determination”<sup>3</sup> she can muster, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”

She calls him out. She reveals his hypocrisy, his racism.

If this had been anyone other than Jesus, he would have gotten angry and defensive. But because this is Jesus, because all that humanity in him is jostling up next to all that divinity in him, something very different and startling happens. He accepts her rebuke. He doesn’t argue. He doesn’t explain or defend. He doesn’t say, “But I’m supposed to be the good guy!” or “Didn’t you know that I have lots of Syrophenician friends?” or “I don’t see ethnicity.” He doesn’t even get mired in guilt, because this isn’t about him or feeling bad. There’s no time for that. He just says, you’re right: “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.” He heals her.

And at the same time, the Syrophenician woman heals Jesus. She changes him, and in doing so, changes the course of Christianity. Immediately, Jesus heals and feeds other ethnically different people. He now sees outsiders as fully human and belonging to God, deserving his love and mission.

Indeed, this may be a truer sign of Jesus’ sinlessness—not that he was born perfect, but that he was ever ready to listen and grow, to submit to the will of God even when it was painful and difficult. Luke reminds us that Jesus was not stagnant but “grew in wisdom and stature” (2:52). Hebrews tells us that Jesus “learned obedience through what he suffered” (5:8) and was made perfect over time (5:9). How? Philippians says, “He humbled himself” (2:8).

Humility is the greatest answer we have to overcoming racism and every other part of our broken humanity. And because of Jesus, the same redemptive power that was in him is in us also—not just his humanity, but his divinity as well.

When our biases are revealed to us, we can either indulge our pride and say, “Not me! Never!” (even though, yes, Jesus... so definitely, yes, you!), or we can follow Jesus and do that most difficult thing, and reconcile the truth of ourselves to the hope of ourselves. We can listen, grow, and act. We can answer the call for love and healing, not as a threat, but as an invitation from a sibling in God.

Today, our sister Shavonn Lynch gives us that invitation in the *Citizen*. She asks, *Whom does colorblindness benefit?* (Hint: not her, not people of color.) She asks, *If you can only see me as your equal by not seeing the color of my skin, then do you really see me, and am I really your equal?* She challenges us to see difference as a God-given gift, beautiful and powerful, complex, unique and manifold, ready to be celebrated and explored, rather than erased.

May we all learn, and follow Jesus into a greater love. For with both his full humanity and his full divinity on our side, racism doesn’t stand a chance. **Amen.**

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<sup>3</sup> Jessica Vazquez Torres