

Our Hebrew scriptures this week are a bit incongruous.

**1 Kings 5: 1, 7, 10-12**

Now King Hiram of Tyre sent his servants to Solomon, when he heard that they had anointed him king in place of his father; for Hiram had always been a friend to David

**7** When Hiram heard the words of Solomon, he rejoiced greatly, and said, "Blessed be the Lord today, who has given to David a wise son to be over this great people."

**10** So Hiram supplied Solomon's every need for timber of cedar and cypress. **11** Solomon in turn gave Hiram twenty thousand cors of wheat as food for his household, and twenty cors of fine oil. Solomon gave this to Hiram year by year. **12** So the Lord

**Ezekiel 26:1-6**

In the eleventh year, on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord came to me:

**2** Mortal, because Tyre said concerning Jerusalem,

"Aha, broken is the gateway of the peoples;

it has swung open to me;

I shall be replenished,

now that it is wasted,"

**3** therefore, thus says the Lord God:

See, I am against you, O Tyre!

I will hurl many nations against you, as the sea hurls its waves.

gave Solomon wisdom, as he promised him. There was peace between Hiram and Solomon; and the two of them made a treaty.

**4** They shall destroy the walls of Tyre and break down its towers.

I will scrape its soil from it  
and make it a bare rock.

**5** It shall become, in the midst of the sea, a place for spreading nets.

I have spoken, says the Lord God.

It shall become plunder for the nations,

**6** and its daughter-towns in the country shall be killed by the sword.

Then they shall know that I am the Lord.

Tyre (and its sister city Sidon) were the heart of Phoenicia--a wealthy and powerful ancient empire based on trading, producing purple dye, glass making, superior ship building, and powerful trade alliances.

The 1 Kings passage reflects a period in the history of Israel where the Phoenician people of Tyre and Sidon were important allies and trade partners of Israel and Judah. The height of this mutually beneficial arrangement was 8 to 10 centuries BCE.

The Phoenician people were considered Canaanites--biblical pagans who worshiped Gods other than YHWH like Ashara and various Ba'al and Melquart who, was roughly equivalent to Heracles/ Hercules. In the books of Kings, the Phoenician woman Jezebel is married to King Ahab and to the consternation of the prophets Elijah and Elisha insists on continuing to worship her own gods.

Meanwhile, Ezekiel writes in/of a time when the two peoples have become rivals, or at least non-allies. Babylon has swept through the region. The Babylonian Exile of the Jewish people began in 597BCE. Nebuchadnezzar II laid siege to Tyre between 586 and 573BCE. Neb razed the mainland city of Tyre, but the island of Tyre with two excellent natural ports and a top notch naval fleet suffered little.

Ezekiel prophesied that "proud" Tyre who worshiped the wrong gods would get what's coming to her as well.

In 322BCE, Tyre ran afoul of Alexander the Great who swept conquering and spreading Greek Hellenism throughout the region. Alexander's impatience and military imagination were unrivaled. He used the remains of old Tyre on the shore to build a causeway out to the island of Tyre using siege weapon from both the land bridge and his own navy to subdue Tyre in less than a year. Alexander toppled Tyre to rubble and sold its inhabitants into slavery making Carthage in North Africa the new seat of

Phoenician power. The causeway has collected so much sediment over the centuries that Tyre is now situated on a peninsula.

In our New Testament scripture today, Jesus visits Tyre. Tyre remained barren for about 250 years after razed by Alexander, and was recolonized by Rome about 100 years before today's text. It was again a bustling and wealthy port city.

And so, 1 Kings and Ezekiel draw a sharp contrast that sets the stage for today's text. Tyre is non-Jewish city that is roughly a two day walk from the Sea of Galilee. They're culturally distinct from the Jews, but not hostile. They're a prosperous and bustling center of trade.

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Matthew 15: 21-28 NRSV'

21 Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. 22 Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." 23 But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." 24 He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." 25 But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." 26 He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." 27 She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." 28 Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

Does this text unsettle you?

If so, good, scripture should be a little unsettling. Uncomfortable.

### **Jesus does not look good in this scripture.**

They're are ways to try to soften Jesus' words. "Hey, called her a puppy not a dog!" as if that's somehow better. "He was testing her!" Was he? That does not seem to be the plain sense of the text. "He was teasing and said it with a smile!" that doesn't seem at all like the tone based on the woman's reaction.

In a plain reading of the text, a desperate woman approaches Jesus, consistently calling out-- *krazo*-ing (κράζω-ing), crying, crawling, like a crow. News of Jesus' exploits have preceded him even here in this pagan city, and she calls to him *kyrie* (κύριε), Lord, Son of David, a title that reveals she has faith that he is the Lord.

When Jesus doesn't answer or acknowledge the woman, the disciples plea, "Send her away, for she keeps crowing after us."

Send her away = Ἀπόλυσον

**form:** Ἀπόλυσον *Apoluson* [aorist](#), [active](#), [imperative](#), [2nd](#), [singular](#)

**root:** ἀπολύω *apolyo* (G630)

to free fully, i.e. (literally) relieve, release, dismiss (reflexively, depart), or (figuratively) let die, pardon or (specially) divorce

1. to set free

2. to let go, dismiss, (to detain no longer)

1. a petitioner to whom liberty to depart is given by a decisive

answer

2. to bid depart, send away
3. to let go free, release
  1. a captive i.e. to loose his bonds and bid him depart, to give him liberty to depart
  2. to acquit one accused of a crime and set him at liberty
  3. indulgently to grant a prisoner leave to depart
  4. to release a debtor, i.e. not to press one's claim against him, to remit his debt
4. used of divorce, to dismiss from the house, to repudiate. The wife of a Greek or Roman may divorce her husband.
5. to send one's self away, to depart

Scholars brighter than me consistently translate this, “send her away,” but I don’t see why it isn’t “set her free”? The disciples know Jesus has the power to heal her daughter.

So a woman pleads, the disciples plead, and Jesus turns and callously denies her. She again calls out to him, *kyrie*, Lord, and he calls her a dog. A racial slur.<sup>1</sup>

**Jesus does not look good in this scripture.**

“Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David,” sounds an awful lot like

“Please, officer, I can’t breathe,” right about now.

**Is this your holy book? Is this whom you worship?**

Is this your God who answers a broken woman calling out his name with insult and disregard?

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<sup>1</sup> at least, and possibly an insult to the philosophy of Cynicism as well.

Now is when we squirm in our seats a little bit, uncomfortable, and try to explain Jesus' words away.

Jesus has been teaching all around the sea of Galilee, healing people wherever he goes. He has healed lepers and paralyzed people, eaten with tax collectors, cast out demons, and bickered with religious authorities. Just the other day he fed a multitude of people near the Sea of Galilee just southeast of here. The crowds follow him wherever he goes: across the sea and back, up the mountains to high and lonely places, he has even walked on water to try to get a break. He has most recently (according to the authors of Mark and Matthew) clashed again with religious authorities about "true defilement," what is "clean" and "unclean." They just don't get it. They don't see the living God, they just see rules. Jesus must have thought that if he could pass anonymously anywhere at all it would be in this--though nearby--foreign city.

And, then, like everywhere else, here comes someone asking something of him.

Honestly, as a mom, I feel Jesus' pain here. Many times in the last weeks I have hidden from my kids in the basement, or behind the garage, or inside my closet to get a moment of peace. I have snapped at them too.

Jesus doesn't look good here. He looks uncomfortably human.

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An illuminating aside here is that in Jesus' culture dogs were not pets. They scavenged for scraps and were unclean. Dogs certainly would not have been in the house. The woman's culture was more like our own with pet dogs as part of the family. They weren't fed "dog food," but lay under the table eating scraps from the children's plates.

Of course, in this metaphor, we are talking about spiritual food, about grace and salvation and who the Reign of God is for. Jesus says that this food is for the lost sheep of the house of Israel. This woman is a disdained dog and not a carefully tended sheep for whom a shepherd would search.

What's your greatest fear when you cry out to God? That you won't be heard? Or that God will spit in your face? When faced with such would you tuck your tail and slink away, or would you grab on tighter?

And, so the woman twists Jesus' own words back at him, "Fine, I may be an "unclean" dog, but even dogs get scraps." Who is this salvation for anyway, *kyrie*.

Sometimes my children twist what I teach them, my own words, back on me, and I hate it because they are right and I was being a jerk. I wonder if Jesus had that same sense.

*Directly before this passage*, Jesus says

16 Then he said, “Are you also still without understanding? 17 Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? 18 But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. 19 For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. 20 These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.”

Of course, the woman hadn't heard Jesus teach that what comes out of one's mouth, “*kyrie, kyrie,*” reveals their heart and that one's unclean hands are irrelevant, but she has flipped those words on him and made him look in the mirror.

Part of what makes this passage so baffling is that we know that salvation is also for the Gentiles, we know that in Matthew 28:19 Jesus says, “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

Is it possible that until this woman confronted Jesus he thought of himself as savior of the Jews but now his eyes and heart were opened wider?

Because now Jesus addresses her more softly, γύναϊ, “woman,”--the same way he address his own mother--“great is your faith; let what you wish come true.” And her daughter was healed.

The author of Mark chose to include this story about Jesus despite it being less than flattering. In Matthew's gospel, the author expands on the story--he doesn't try to minimize it. The gospel writers could have left this particular story on the floor and they chose not to.

The gospel is uncomfortable. Disquieting. Unsettling.

It requires us to expand our thinking, to change.

Change is uncomfortable and we resist it until the place we are standing is so uncomfortable we have to move.

Jesus was forced by his own words and actions, by his own mission, to see the humanity in this woman. Jesus' human nature was grumpy, but his holy nature, spun him around to look her in the face.

"Kyrie," she cawed to him, "please heal my daughter, she was a demon."

It's ironic that she had ears to hear and eyes to see when the religious people did not.

And so, I ask you, religious people, do you?

Are you still comfortable here, or will you change?

