

**The Question of the Week**

“Jesus said: ‘It’s not right to throw the food for the children to the dogs.’”  
Matthew 15:26

No matter how you translate this passage of Jesus and his encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman, the Lord doesn’t come off sounding too good. We all know that in the end he sends the woman back to her daughter declaring her sickness to be over. The woman departs in faith—believing what Jesus says to be so. But before that this woman had to endure the Lord’s silence, his avoidance, his barbed remarks. What gives? This doesn’t sound at all like the Jesus we know.

One of the pivotal things missing from the Scriptures but which is omnipresent in human interaction is that the Scriptures are two dimensional. What is missing is the tone, the context, the interplay between Jesus and this woman. Jesus is not on his own turf. He is no longer in his own country or among his Jewish brothers and sisters. He is out on the seacoast where the ancestors of the Philistines live. The Jews were not liked by their neighbors on any side. And the Jews themselves had little use for any of their neighbors either. We do know that they called each other “dogs.” Not exactly an endearing epithet. Jesus obviously knows this. And, I believe, brings it into this interaction.

Jesus knows that his primary mission is to the people of Israel. To them first and foremost so that, as the Chosen People of God they can first hear the message of the good news and in turn bear witness to that good news to the rest of the world. That is why they have been chosen—to be the means by which God’s light and truth is conveyed to the rest of the world. Jesus in effect is bantering back and forth with this woman. He knows what she is asking. He is testing whether she really believes in him and the power he brings. And so he jousts with her. In effect he is saying, “You know, my dear that your people call us Jews dogs. And we call you dogs too. I have something like manna to feed the People of Israel. It is not right to just give it to everybody, especially to you who hate our people. It would be like taking children’s food and throwing it to the dogs. Not right.” Her response cuts through his jousting. Even the dogs get crumbs. That’s’ all I’m asking Jesus, some little crumb for my sick daughter. And you can do that if you choose.” She believes. And he responds with grace. It is not as harsh as it might seem and the outcome is vintage Jesus. Can we hear with new ears? The question of the week.