

I regularly embarrass my spouse and friends in public. I know it, but I cannot help myself. Wherever we are, not matter if we are late for an important meeting, or going out of dinner, or dressed up for a special occasion, I unabashedly stop to greet other people's dogs. ALL THE TIME. I will turn around and go half way down the block to meet other peoples' dogs. I will holler across the street to ask if I can come over and meet their dog. And it is not that I just stop to greet them, I pretty much fling myself down on the sidewalk in front of other peoples' dogs. I am utterly and unrepentantly besotted with dogs-their soft eyes, their waggedy tails, the way they like to cuddle next to you on the couch on a cold evening, and even more want to share just a little bit of that sandwich you're eating or give you their paw for the eight thousandth time. I think that dogs are proof that unconditional love exists and for me that is a proof of God.

And yet, even I know that calling someone a dog is not a compliment. Insulting someone by calling them a dog is not a recent human phenomenon. Scriptural references to dogs are unanimously negative: dogs prowling and howling and dangerously attacking. Dogs were dirty scavengers, so there is no sugar-coating the insult when Jesus says to the Syrophoenician woman, who has flung herself at his feet begging him to help her little daughter, "it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Excuse me, Jesus?! I would have thought that the Blessed Mother would have raised Jesus with better manners than this!

This woman is definitely an outsider, a pagan and a gentile- therefore unclean- and she's from Sidon, a region whose people had been the enemy in battles against the Israelites. Furthermore, she presents her request to Jesus without introduction or being accompanied by male members of her family. And it was a fairly common ethnic slur of that time to refer to non-Jews as dogs.

I am impressed by this woman's courage in coming to Jesus at all. But mothers of sick children will go to heroic lengths to help their suffering child, so breaking a few major social taboos and ignoring past history between warring peoples, is understandable to us. I do imagine that, even if I did muster the courage to approach this renowned healer who was trying to take a secret vacation in my neighborhood, I would have heard Jesus' harsh response as "No way!" response and I would have slunk out of there as quickly as possible.

But I am even more impressed with the Syrophoenician woman's perseverance and quick retort. "Even the little dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." She doesn't argue Jesus' basic premise- but says, well, even if we are dogs, that doesn't mean we are out of the picture entirely. This answer with, dare I say, its dogged persistence opens up a change in Jesus. He hears this foreign, stranger woman and her call on his ministry. And it changes him. And her daughter is healed.

Up until this point, Jesus' ministry as a first century Jewish teacher had focused solely on the Israelites. Letting them know that the kingdom of God has come near, the very message of the Incarnation. In this encounter with the Syrophoenician woman, we see the beginnings of the expansion of understanding that this kingdom of God come near will not be limited to the Israelites.

Some folks may find it strange to think that Jesus had to learn this, especially those who had the notion that Jesus knew everything, from day one, in his life and ministry and never changed. Today's Gospel challenges that perspective, by describing a situation in which Jesus' understanding is changed by relationship with a stranger. Jesus changed and grew in understanding, thanks to a woman unafraid to talk back. Just like God changed in the book of Exodus, when Moses talked God out of destroying Israel after the Golden Calf incident.

There is great promise in these stories of change. When we encounter one another and really listen and experience each other, we are changed. My take away message from the Gospel this week is the call for each of us to be open to being changed, as Jesus was. If we want to follow Jesus in Justice and mercy and love, we also need to follow him in encountering others and being changed by that.

One of the gifts of having a faith community like SPR is the gift of many opportunities to open ourselves to such encounters. It is no accident that today we begin a new program year by presenting to the community a plethora of opportunities for such encounter- with one another in worship roles and music, with children and youth, with neighbors, with leaders, with our partner mission and school in Haiti.

Maybe God wants to change you through serving worship roles, such as lector or prayer leaders or even as an acolyte (grown-ups are welcome to do that too, and we can even teach you how to play with incense during worship!).

Maybe it's through telling the stories of our faith in the Godly Play classrooms or through building new or deeper relationships with other folks at SPR on Tap.

Maybe it's through tutoring at Shoesmith Elementary or through singing in one of the choirs.

Maybe your opportunity to be changed this year is by providing radical hospitality as an usher for our services, or by being a "Hospitality Helper" by shopping for coffee hour food now and then.

Perhaps God wants to expand your understanding through baking communion bread or cooking for Open Kitchen or digging in the garden.

So, I ask you to follow BOTH the courageous Syrophoenician woman, who took the risk of encounter with Jesus, and the example of Jesus who was willing to be changed by his encounter with her. Visit the parish hall and learn about all the ministry opportunities here and sign up to be open to the new changes that God wants to make in you, in our faith community and in our wider world.

God only knows what adventure and healing and change might be the result.