Spirituality
Pencil Preaching





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“Let the children be fed first” (Mark 7:27).

1 Kgs 11:4-13; Mark 7:24-30

The jarring story of the encounter between the Syrophoenician woman and Jesus seems out of character because of his usual compassion for the needy. He has traveled north of Galilee into pagan territory to find privacy after his intense healing ministry among the Jews, but his reputation has gone before him. The woman begs for healing for her daughter suffering from an evil spirit. Jesus resists, saying he was sent to the chosen people, and then he uses a common Jewish slur to compare pagans to the house dogs under the table waiting for scraps after the children are fed. She uses the metaphor to insist that the dogs are in fact given the scraps. For her persistence and logic, Jesus grants her request and the woman’s daughter is healed.

The story has been interpreted in several ways. One is that Jesus was only pretending to resist and testing the woman’s faith with their exchange. Another is that Jesus genuinely learned that the Spirit was expanding his mission to Gentiles through this encounter with faith outside of Israel. That the human Jesus was learning as the Spirit guided him is consistent with Mark’s low Christology and emphasis on Jesus’ humanity, compared to the fourth Gospel in which Jesus is divinely self-aware in all his words and actions.

Word and Spirit are always active in the church. This Gospel, proclaimed in the Liturgy universally today, will inevitably attract commentary on the heels of the

release of Pope Francis' response to the Amazon Synod from those who had hoped for more openness to a married clergy and greater leadership roles for women recommended by the majority of the bishops at the synod. In a Eucharist-deprived region under assault from environmental degradation and exploitation endangering the planet, will Catholics begging for the Eucharist be denied because of the limits of a particular theological model of priesthood, or has the pope, by not ruling on this question definitively, left the door open to further inspiration?

If Pope Francis, like Mark's Jesus, is in a learning mode, perhaps we will glimpse the answer to that question when he preaches on this Gospel story at his morning Mass in the chapel at Santa Marta. Stay tuned.

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