

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

“Does this dress make my butt look big?” This is a loaded question that has been posed to husbands and friends at times. Of course, “NO” is the answer no matter the situation. And of course no one will ever say, “the dress doesn’t make your butt look big, your butt *is* big.” Perhaps there are folks bold enough to say that but for the most part, we don’t say things that are intentionally hurtful.

On the other hand, we don’t have to look to far to hear hurtful things being said in our culture during this political season leading up to election day. Sadly, because this happens so frequently, we have become desensitized to this...except when it hurts us...then we object. But there are times when hurtful things are said to those we don’t like or those we disagree with and we don’t object because we take delight in them, so agree with a hurtful comment. There are times we say hurtful things and have no clue just how hurtful they can be. Nonetheless, hurtful things are said, both unintentionally and intentionally and we are all, at times, recipients and participants in this matter, it is who we are...like or not...we are all human and this is just part of our nature. This is not an excuse nor a reason to justify this, it’s just who we are and what we do even when we try not to do this; we all say hurtful things...unintentionally and intentionally.

Today in our Gospel lesson we have an example of something hurtful being said, perhaps intentional...perhaps unintentional, we really don’t know. But no matter how you choose to view it, something hurtful is being said.

I think we all know this unsettling passage. We have heard this dreadful back-handed insult that casts this poor Gentile woman of Syrophenician origin as a second-class citizen in our Gospel lesson. This isn’t the gentle blue-eyed-blond-haired Jesus we Christians like to think about. What we hear in our Gospel lesson today is Jesus insulting and dehumanizing a desperate woman seeking care for her daughter. What mother of any origin would not seek care and deflect an insult in order to better her daughter? She comes to Jesus and respectfully bows down at his feet and begs Jesus to cast a demon out of her daughter. Jesus then says to her:

²⁷ ..."Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." (Mark 7:27)

Yes, Jesus is saying that this gracious healing would be like throwing it to the dogs if he were to heal or exorcise this Gentile daughter. I have to say, I have heard many preachers create all kinds of excuses or they just walkaround the text to *avoid the fact* that Jesus is just plain down rude, hurtful, and very human in this exchange with this woman. I have heard the excuses that Jesus is testing the woman’s faith, or that Jesus was affectionately “nick-naming” this woman and her child in this comment...no, we cannot justify this remark from Jesus, it is an insult, and this is worse than telling her that, yes, your dress does make your butt look big.

Now here is where I think we jump up on our moral soap box and blast Jesus for his rude comments, but without making excuses, there are a few things to look at...especially our role in all of this and how it plays out for us. I guess we figure we have legalistic moral traction for getting a leg up on Jesus by throwing the Eighth Commandment at him, “You are not to bear false witness against your neighbor.”

Now we do this because by our understanding of this we know that this commandment means that it forbids all sins of the tongue by which we may injure or offend our neighbor. “Bearing false witness” is nothing but a work of the tongue. God wants to hold in check whatever is done with the tongue against a neighbor. And by this we will hold the feet of Jesus to the fire and say how dare you be this insulting to this poor woman who is merely seeking your gracious healing for her daughter. But as we sanction our judgment on this comment and the one who is making it, let’s not forget the same commandment holds our feet to the fire as well. When we read on in the explanation of the Eight Commandment in the Large Catechism, we read:

It is a common, pernicious plague that everyone would rather hear evil than good about their neighbors. Even though we ourselves are evil, we cannot tolerate it when anyone speaks evil...

To avoid this vice, therefore, we should note that none has the right to judge and reprove a neighbor publicly, even after having seen a sin committed, unless authorized to judge and reprove. There is a very great difference between judging sin and having knowledge of sin. You may certainly know about a sin, but you should not judge it. I may certainly see and hear that my neighbor sins, but I have no command to tell others about it. If I were to interfere and pass judgment on him, I would fall into a sin greater than that of my neighbor.¹

So, what does this all mean for us today, what is this Gospel lesson from Mark telling us? Where is the Good News for us today?

To dig a little deeper into this lesson today, let’s take away the lens of our legalistic understandings and definitions and look at this story without them. First off, by not getting into too much detail about geography and cultural difference, divisions, and conflicts, we can quickly see that the Gospel goes where we would probably not prefer to go and reaches out to people, we would probably not be so quick to reach out to. However, when the Gospel does this, we can see that it is accomplished in a very very human context that includes all our human hurtful and insulting sin. But through the human insults, the Gospel heals despite them.

There is no doubt that this comment of Jesus toward this woman is wrong, and yes, this may anger us and may even have us claiming the moral high ground by thinking, how dare Jesus say this to her. But actually, the only one who remains true to her faith in Jesus and embodies the Eight Commandment is the woman who is being insulted. The Good News in all of this is that this dreadful exchange shows us that the Gospel still works through our humanness. And when we get past our feelings and our anger, we learn that this dear woman boldly stands face to face with OUR broken human hatefulness and challenges our unhealthy human preconceptions about cultural and racial hatreds. She is so courageous and insightful...to the point that...it alters the view of Jesus throughout the remainder of Mark’s Gospel.

This encounter with this Gentile woman of Syrophenician origin and Jesus is arguably Jesus’ first face-to-face encounter with a Gentile, and it shakes him. It changes him. It changes the way he sees those who don’t share his ethnicity. And we see in Mark’s account of Jesus’ ministry how it changes as we go through the Gospel. In Mark chapter 6, Jesus miraculously feeds thousands of

¹ My comments on the Eight Commandments are from, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* current edition edited by, Robert Kolb, Timothy J. Wengert, and Charles P. Arand, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000, found in *The Large Catechism, The Eight Commandment*, pages 420-421, par. 254-266.

Jews. In chapter 7 before us today, Jesus encounters the Syrophenician woman and we are learning how his change of view plays out. In chapter 8, Jesus miraculously feeds thousands once again—but this time thousands of Gentiles. In this Gospel, from this encounter with a Gentile woman, we see how it fundamentally alters how Jesus sees and treats Gentiles.²

With this said, I believe there may be some thinking...but this is the Son of the God, how is it that he doesn't know this? How can the Son of God be clueless about unhealthy preconceptions of cultural and racial hatreds, and how can he feed into this misconception by insulting this woman? How can the Son of God make such disjointed assumptions along with horrible insults? I believe that it is in this moment that we are reminded today about an aspect of Jesus that we really do not consider or that we either walk around it or just simply disregard, and that is that there is a hypostatic nature about Jesus, rather, in Jesus Christ there is a hypostatic union which plays a huge part in this disturbing and difficult lesson before us today.

This hypostatic understanding of Jesus is from the Greek term: ὑπόστασις (*hypostasis*), meaning person or subsistence or by definition, *hypóstasis* is the underlying, fundamental state or substance that supports all of reality. This term or title is used to describe the union of Christ's humanity and divinity in one hypostasis, or individual personhood.³ Simply put, Jesus Christ, not just in spoken title but in *true nature* is both fully God and fully human. He is simultaneously perfectly divine and perfectly human, having two complete and distinct natures at once and we see a very human Jesus before us today.

Jesus teaches us an important lesson here by modeling an ability to change and through that change, and ability to lean to be gracious in a broken culture. Jesus, in his “humanness” reveals conditioned prejudices from his community...in other words, there were no Gentiles around his neighborhood while he was growing up. There was no one around him who could challenge his views. But in his humanness, he listens when his close-minded views are challenged and as we read through the Gospel of Mark, we learn that he changes. He acknowledges his mistaken preconceived, but very human views and evaluations of other cultures. We then hear this change of heart when Jesus is confronted by a very determined and very strong poor Syrophenician Gentile woman:

²⁸ But she answered [Jesus], "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

²⁹ Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go-- the demon has left your daughter."

³⁰ So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

(Mark 7:28-30)

Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), the Danish philosopher and theologian, called the hypostatic union of Christ “the Absolute Paradox” or the “the Ultimate Paradox.” He did so because God is understood as a perfectly good, a perfectly wise, and a perfectly powerful being, and in Christ God also became perfectly human...a human like each of us, burdened by sin, limited in goodness, knowledge, and understanding and because of that limited goodness, knowledge, and

² This altered view of Jesus in Mark is from an essay titled, “Jesus and the Syrophenician Woman: A Lesson On Refugees and Law School Seals” by Austin Steelman on January 25, 2026, found at <https://harvardichthus.org/2016/01/jesus-and-the-syrophenician-woman-a-lesson-on-refugees-and-law-school-seals/>

³ When discerning and considering my own words to describe the two natures of Christ in the hypostatic union of our Lord, I used this definition found at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hypostatic_union#

understanding we hear that God has even become very humanly hurtful. Kierkegaard believed that this paradox can only be resolved by a leap of faith away from one's understanding and reason towards belief in a loving God who understands us far better than we understand ourselves. This hypostatic union of Christ, simply put, is God's nearness to us. However, this nearness of God defies our finite human comprehension.⁴ And because our human understanding is limited or finite and cannot totally comprehend an infinite God, God comes to us, out of pure love as Jesus Christ, who is very human...who is at the same time God's love manifest before us, a love that takes on our nature and our lot in order to fully understand our nature and lot, and to save us all from it.

In the context of this Gospel lesson today I ask, does this story make my sin look big...no, the story doesn't, my sin is big. Today in this Gospel we see God's love filtered through our human brokenness, but we also see a love that does not fail...*the child is healed*...we are also healed...healed of our sin, even when confined to our humanness, may we see that God's love does not fail. Today in this worship we hear once again that God has come to us, defies our human understanding and saves us in Word and Sacrament...may our blind eyes see, as the prophet Isaiah reminds us today, our deaf ears hear and listen, may our speechless tongues sing for joy, and our hardened hearts melt in the presence of God's love that saves us all from sin and death.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

⁴ Thoughts on Kierkegaard's understanding of the hypostatic nature of Christ is from "Philosophical Fragments" from *The Essential Kierkegaard*, edited by Howard V. and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press 1998, 116-125, along with <https://thedangerousmaybe.medium.com/the-absolute-paradox-a-kierkegardian-consideration-of-jesus-christ-9886cd9cd5ab>