

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Redeemer. Amen.

President Franklin Roosevelt was growing tired of the endless round of formal events where he was expected to perform the glad-handing and small talk with the great and the good of planet Earth. So one day, while being introduced to a long line of guests at the White House, he thought he'd have a bit of fun.

He had always suspected that no one in those reception lines really listened to anything he said. They were too overawed to be in the presence of the President. So that day, he set out to prove it.

It was another dull function and another uninspiring receiving line. FDR made his way along the row of guests, shook their hands, and mumbled, "I murdered my grandmother this morning."

As he expected, the guests made it obvious they weren't listening. They responded with phrases like, "How wonderful, sir. Keep up the good work. God bless you, Mr. President."

It wasn't until the end of the line that someone disproved his theory. The Bolivian ambassador to Washington leaned over and said, "I'm sure she had it coming, sir."

Preachers in our tradition have a dirty little secret. After we've been doing this gig for a few years, we learn to predict the Sundays when the awkward Bible readings will appear—and make sure we're on vacation those days. Or we tackle one of the other lessons.

This Sunday three years ago, the last time these readings came up, I preached on the Old Testament lesson.

Now, as you can see, I have spectacularly failed to be on vacation today. And because I try never to preach on the same passage twice to the same congregation—after 33 years, I have a tiny bit of professional integrity left—I'm going to tackle the Gospel lesson and some very unexpected, even prejudiced-sounding, words from the lips of Jesus.

He is approached by a woman.

Jesus is in the town of Tyre, and the woman is from an area we now call Lebanon. At that time and in that place, this is a big deal. Jews and Syrophoenicians, to give this woman her proper regional identity, were enemies. They had history. There were a thousand years of hostility between Israel and the Syrophoenicians: battles over land, battles over religion, and tit-for-tat episodes of economic exploitation and military aggression.

So this woman, whose daughter is critically ill and who is going out of her mind with fear, approaches Jesus. But that painful history doesn't allow her to get too close.

Matthew says she shouts to Jesus. She's at a distance. Despite her desperation, she doesn't want to get too close to this Israelite and risk judgment from her community.

And Jesus, moved with compassion, embraces the woman and heals her daughter.

No, he doesn't.

Get this: shockingly, Jesus ignores her.

Now the disciples get involved, and they say to Jesus, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting at us."

And Jesus says, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

Then she comes closer, right up to him, kneels, and says, "Lord, help me."

If you're not troubled yet by Jesus' conduct, you're bound to be when he speaks again.

He says, "It's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

Wait.

Jesus point-blank refuses to heal the girl, and he calls this woman a dog.

But she's not going to accept this. In her desperation, she is up for a verbal fight. She answers back: "Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

And this does something to Jesus. He is moved by her persistence, touched by her courage.

"Woman, great is your faith. Let it be done for you as you wish."

And her daughter is instantly healed.

How can this be?

This is Jesus insulting someone and even sounding a bit prejudiced. Can this be right?

Well, I think it's going to be okay. You see, context is everything. Sometimes the problems we have understanding the Bible can be resolved by looking at the context of the words—and so it is here.

In the first half of the reading, you may have noticed that Jesus is in full-on conflict with the Jewish religious leaders. They are arguing over food: what can be eaten according to the law and how it must be eaten if it is to be consumed properly.

Jesus finishes that bout of verbal boxing with liberating wisdom: It is not what goes into a person that makes them unclean, but what comes out of them—the lies, the hatred, the pride. That is what defiles people.

The Pharisees, you see, were weaponizing the kosher laws. They had turned the Old Testament regulations into ways they could trumpet their own purity and wallow in their own self-righteousness while condemning people who were not like them—the people who did not keep the kosher laws.

Today, we call it virtue signaling.

So here's Jesus arguing with the Pharisees over food and over who is righteous. Then comes this encounter with the Gentile woman, and Jesus picks up the food theme and comes out with this metaphor, which he lobbs at her:

“It's not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.”

Now, we can't see Jesus' face or hear the tone of his voice because all we have is a book. But given that this encounter with the Gentile woman comes immediately after this infuriating conversation with the arrogant Pharisees about food, I think we can see a way through the problem.

Could it be that, rather than insulting this woman, Jesus is actually on her side?

This might be sarcasm directed at the Pharisees, who are still watching and still feeling smug. It might be a satire on the attitude they have just displayed. Maybe, in his tone and his actions, Jesus is mocking them: *They* are the true children of God, while this woman and her kind are mere dogs.

With this tussle still ringing in Jesus' ears and his anger still stirring in his soul, I can see how he could use sarcasm to expose the Pharisees for the self-righteous judges they are while, at the same time, affirming the dignity of this Gentile woman.

That's my take on it.

I wouldn't die for that interpretation.

I wouldn't even put my job on the line for it.

But it does fit with what we know of the compassionate, embracing love of Jesus and the righteous anger he had for virtue signaling.

And if I'm right, then Jesus isn't just doing an FDR and saying something shocking to see if anyone is listening. He's doing it out of compassion.

Of course he is.

And if I'm right, then you'd expect Jesus' next action to be casting the demon out of the girl—which it is.

The listening Jesus.

So, who are you in this event? What is God's word to you this morning?

If we identify with the disciples—remember, they were the ones who complained that this pesky Gentile was annoying them by shouting for help—then God's word might be a rebuke.

God would remind us that Jesus' default mode was for the outsider, the excluded, the other.

It was the religious establishment that, time and again, got under the skin of Christ. It was never the sinners they looked down on.

And so, if we identify with the Twelve, we might look at our own lives and our own hearts to examine whether there is any prejudice there.

Sometimes I shock myself with my prejudices—the thoughts that flash through my head and occasionally even come out of my mouth.

It's what comes out of a person that makes them unclean.

The people I'm most prejudiced against are those who are prejudiced. I judge their behavior through the lens of my moral superiority and interpret all they do as coming from bad motives.

And then I remember that I'm them.

If we make assumptions about people based on their appearance, level of education, political beliefs, religious faith, address, lifestyle, or anything else, we need to learn this:

God has a heart for the other.

And the Christian who loses sight of that has lost something of God.

Maybe you're the woman in the story, and for you the news is good:

God listens even to you.

The story goes of a Native American who was walking through Midtown Manhattan with a friend who was a native New Yorker. They were walking through Times Square when the Native American seized his friend's arm and said in a low voice, "I hear a cricket."

His friend said, "Come on—a cricket? This is Times Square."

He persisted. "No, I really do."

"That's impossible. You can't hear a cricket. There are taxis going by, horns honking, people yelling, brakes screeching."

But he insisted. He walked to the end of the block, crossed the street, looked around, tilted his head, and then walked briskly to a large cement planter where a tree was growing.

He dug into the mud and found the cricket.

“See?” he yelled, holding the insect high above his head.

His friend marveled. “How could you hear that?”

“Well, it depends what you’re listening for. Here, let me show you.”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of change—a few quarters, three or four nickels, some dimes.

“Now watch.”

He held the coins high and dropped them on the sidewalk.

Every head within ten yards turned and looked.

When you cry to God, he listens.

He has this amazing ability to shut out all the noise and hear you in your silent plea, your wordless groan, your quiet murmur.

He listens to you as if you were the only cricket—sorry, person—in the world.

And so it should be for us.

As you have received God’s time and attention, give it to others.

That’s the biblical pattern, isn’t it?

We receive. We give.

We receive. We give.

We keep the flow going.

Who knows how many times God turns up each day and speaks through someone we have already written off?

Being attentive to God means giving our attention to human beings, because every person we meet could be the voice God uses to speak to us.

This is the only time you will ever hear me say this:

Be the Bolivian ambassador.

Amen.