

There's a story about Karl Barth, the famous 20th century theologian, who wrote a massive 12-volume work on Christian theology as well as being the primary author of the *Barmen Theological Declaration*, a document that opposed the Nazi regime at the start of WWII. The story is about Dr. Barth when he was a young pastor serving a rural congregation in Switzerland during WWI.

His grandmother lived with him in the parsonage and one afternoon he returned home to find that his grandmother had organized a Bible study group that was meeting in his living room. Young Pastor Barth stepped into the room, greeted everyone and then excused himself and slipped upstairs to his study. Throughout the afternoon he heard a lot of loud and animated conversation from the Bible study. At dinner that evening he asked his grandmother what book they were studying. “*Ezekiel*,” she replied. “*Ezekiel!*” Pastor Barth sputtered, “Why *Ezekiel* is a very difficult book. It is full of problematic and hard to understand passages. “That’s alright,” Grandmother said, “the things we don’t understand we explain to each other.”

I don’t know whether Dr. Barth laughed or cried; however, from what I’ve read about him, his laughter probably roared from the rafters. But, still, like Dr. Barth’s comment to his grandmother, we have a passage from the *Gospel according to Mark* that is “full of problematic and hard to understand passages.”

We just heard of two miracles of healing from Jesus. It’s so easy to be impressed by these miracles. We become enamored by them. We sometimes begin to see the miracles as the most important work Jesus does — so much so that we come to believe that that is the work of a **real** Christian — to open the eyes of the blind, to unstop the ears of the deaf, to cause the lame to leap like deer, and the tongue of the speechless to sing with joy.

That's what certain televangelists would have us believe — that real Christians can perform the very same miracles as did our Lord Jesus. Well, I won't say that these men and women don't have a gift; I've seen some amazing things happen, but as Paul points out in several of his letters to the church not all gifts are given to all people. And, if we go chasing after such gifts, then we are often ignoring or outright denying the gifts that God has given to each of us. But, the gift of healing is not part of the problematic passage as recorded in *Mark*.

What do we do with Jesus' opening comment to the Syro-Phoenician woman? As more than one Biblical commentator has asked, "How could Jesus stoop so low as to call her a dog?" Yes, there are lots of ways to reconcile what Jesus said. He didn't really say it. He really didn't mean it. We don't fully understand what He said because of the differences between 1st century culture and today's. Blah, Blah, Blah....Maybe all that's true, again, maybe not.

Maybe, the story about Dr. Barth and his grandmother is applicable here. What if the Syro-Phoenician woman was the one doing the explaining in this passage? What if Jesus was the one who did not fully understand and needed some help interpreting God's will and way in this case. Maybe Jesus needed to have his vision cleared and his worldview adjusted so that he could see just exactly how large God's love is.

James takes his readers to task for failing to live out the faith that is within them. In particular, he rebukes them for showing favor to the rich and pushing aside the poor. While Martin Luther did in one place call James "an epistle of straw," because he thought it favored works over faith, he also said in his preface to his commentary on James and Jude, "I think highly of the *epistle of James* . . ." he simply wished to guard against those who depended on faith without going on to do works for God's Kin-dom

In our Gospel lesson we see Jesus living out the coming of the Kin-dom by healing a young girl with a demon and a deaf man with a speech impediment. But, but . . .there's this difficult part about exactly who it is the Kin-dom has come for. Is it only for the "children" of Israel? Or, is it only for

Kin-dom has come for is it only for the “children” of Israel? Or, is it only for the rich? Or, only for the poor? Or, is it also for the “dogs,” the Gentiles, for those who are outside of our religious circles?

Taking the text as it is, it appears that Jesus is saying that his mission is only to the Jewish people. If that is what he means, then he failed to remember that the promise is that the Kin-dom will come from God **through** the Jewish people in order to bless all people *everywhere*.

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As *Mark* tells it, Jesus stands corrected. Just like Barth's Grandma's Bible study, the non-Jewish woman has helped Jesus to understand a difficult part of the scripture and a difficult part of his call. As we will see later in *Mark*, the further Jesus goes in his ministry the deeper his understanding of his mission becomes. And this deeper understanding is, in part, a result of his encounters with people who aren't afraid to confront him with hard and difficult truths.

Let me illustrate how encounters can lead to understanding: A young adult youth leader was chaperoning his youth group at a national youth gathering in New Orleans. While out and about in the city one afternoon they ran across a couple of homeless men on a park bench. The youth leader lived in a major city neighborhood with a lot of street people, so he assessed the time, the space, and the group's safety; and while one of the men approached him and started talking, he reached in his back pack and pulled out an apple while signaling the kids to keep moving. The man was insulted, “I asked you if you believe in God and you try to give me an apple!”

The youth leader was struck dumb and somewhat appalled at himself. “Here I had spent all week talking to these kids about carrying Christ into the world, to the most needy among us, and the first chance I got to live that out in front of them I blew it,” he related. But the moment was redeemed. The young man apologized and started talking with the man. Their time together ended with the man asking the group for prayer and so

they prayed for several minutes together. It was, the group said, a very holy moment.

The Good News of God's grace and love changes people. It heals us; changes our relationships; changes the way we see right and wrong, rich and poor, us and them. It even changed Jesus and the way He saw the world and the way He saw Himself in it. May God's grace come to each of us and change us. May it loosen our tongues so that we may speak explanations of difficult truths to one another. May it open our ears so that we may hear the truth when it spoken to us in love. May it free our arms to embrace those in any need. May it strengthen our legs so that we can go where God is calling us. Most of all, may it heal our hearts so that we can invite all God's children to the table of God's love.

Let us pray: Holy and mighty God, You find ways to remind us of Your grace, mercy, and love. Your Son has shown us that Your Kingdom is larger than just Presbyterians, or Baptists, or Catholics, or Christians of any stripe — it has to include Jews and Muslims, and even the possibility of those whose belief in You is not apparent. That makes it hard for us to understand. Yet, we trust You. Like the Syro-Phoenician woman, a Gentile, one outside the Jewish circle, our faith and trust in You and in Jesus makes us whole, makes us part of Your children, of Your Kingdom. For that we give You thanks and praise. For that we celebrate with joy. For that we are inspired to go out and share the Good News. May Your love be visible to all in our actions and our words. We pray these things in the name of Jesus, Your beloved Son, our Lord and Savior. Amen.