

I think we've probably just read one of the most embarrassing passages in the Bible.

A desperate Gentile mother begs Jesus to heal her daughter, and Jesus treats her dismissively. He is short with her and surprisingly ugly to her. It's one of the most shocking and off-putting passages in the Bible – but we still have so much to learn from it.

Because Jesus is showing us his humanity. He's showing you he knows from experience what it's like when you lose your temper, when you treat someone poorly. And he wants us to know what he discovered that day.

Clearly, Jesus was tired at this point. He had just been pursued by tremendous crowds, fed five thousand hungry people, and argued with religious leaders who were being critical of him. And we get a sense of Jesus' state of mind when the lesson says he entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there.

Most of us know something about this, this need to go into hiding. A young mother who has been tending her young children all day and finally sent them next door to play with the neighbors for a few hours knows what a relief it is to collapse on the couch or maybe even run a bath. That's what Jesus was after. And when the Gentile woman of Syrophenician origin suddenly approaches him and begs him to help, it's a little like one of the children suddenly bursting in the front door crying to the young mother that his brother had hit him and wouldn't stop calling him names.

It seemed that Jesus just snapped at that point. He had had too much. And most embarrassing of all to Christians through the ages, he shows a kind of condescending prejudice toward this Gentile woman and her daughter, referring to them as dogs.

One point of this lesson might be for us to remember that we are around people every day who are judged in this way. It might be the clothes they wear or the beat-up car they have to drive. It might be the color of their skin, the kind of job they have, or their lack of a job. It might be a lack of grooming or of manners. It could be an accent that makes you wonder about that wall.

The Gentile woman of Syrophenician origin is all around us, every day. And all she wants is what you and I want. Kindness. Healing. Love. Dignity. But this woman's need is particularly urgent, and Jesus is spent.

You know what it's like when you're in a hurry to get to somewhere and you suddenly come to a long line of cars that are stopped because of some sort of construction project that seems to be proceeding at a snail's pace. Far up ahead is a guy with a stop sign on a pole. His job is to turn that sign periodically to the other side, which says "slow" so that your lane can proceed. If you've had a rough day, this is just a nuisance.

One such road worker was standing in the hot sun some time ago, with his two-sided sign – stop/slow – turning it now and then, and gesturing to traffic, when one of the frustrated drivers rolled past this road worker and said to him dismissively, “Man, I don’t see how you can stand doing such boring work.”

But the road worker simply replied, “Well, I keep people safe. I care about these workers behind me here, so I take care of them. And I keep YOU safe, too. And all those other people behind you.”

Another Gentile of Syrophenician origin who is in touch with something important, with his own sense of dignity and purpose, and he has a lesson for us.

When Jesus dismisses the Gentile woman by saying it is not right to throw the children’s food to the dogs, she replies without missing a beat, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” In other words, I really don’t care what you think of me; I just want my daughter to be healed.

Unlike other passages in the Gospels, Jesus is not the one who is teaching here. Jesus is learning. And the lesson for all of us is that God is not just trying to reach us through the Bible or our prayers, but more often through each other. And very often it seems God chooses the weak in the world to shame the powerful, those who are despised and marginalized in the world to teach those who are well-known and highly regarded.

God, of course, is constantly reaching out to us in our daily lives, and today’s lesson invites us to ask, “How is God trying to get my attention? Is it through the celebrities and powerful people of the world, or is it more likely through the Hispanic woman with the crying baby in Walmart, or maybe the spouse who sits across from you at the breakfast room table? Every one of them wants only what we want. Healing. Love. Kindness. Dignity.

Years ago, when I was being repeatedly hospitalized for chemotherapy treatments, my friend who was a monk, said to me as I prepared to re-enter the hospital, “Gary, while you’re in the hospital this time, I want you to pay special attention to the lowest people on the totem pole. Everybody will be excited to see the oncologists and specialists in their lab coats. But I want you to pay attention to the aides, to the person who cleans your room and empties the trash, to the one who makes up your bed. Speak to those people, listen to them. Because very often, God uses the least among us to bring us special messages, important blessings, and healing.”

And all I want to say is, he was right. And ever since, I have asked myself, why do I so often look to the powerful and those who are in the spotlight at the top, when everything about Christianity is constantly urging me to pay attention to those who are hidden at the bottom? Why am I so riveted by antics in Washington D.C. and so oblivious to the great masses of people who are only hoping that their daughter will be cured, that they can get a job, that there will be enough food tomorrow for the children – these are the people who could care less about the

dramas that consume to many of us. And often, God is speaking to us through them, hoping we'll pay attention.

I like to think that the frustrated driver who encountered the road worker that day perhaps got in touch again with his own calling, not just to achieve the highest position in the law firm or the bank, but to keep the people in HIS life safe, to care for the people around him. Maybe that guy with the stop/slow sign was God's messenger, reminding the driver that making a lot of money in a fancy downtown office can't compare to the dignity and worth of a man who lovingly cares for and protects the people around him.

In a way, the encounter with the Gentile woman was a learning experience for Jesus, as it is meant to be for all of us. The Gentile woman is around us all the time, and maybe this lesson encourages us to ask ourselves, how is God trying to get my attention this week?