

Christ in Crisis: In whom do we see God?
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*Living God, may your word be proclaimed and may we claim it with joy for our lives today.
Continue to speak to us through my words or in spite of them. Amen.*

Mark 7:24-30

Sometimes people ask me what my favorite piece of music is, and I typically answer, "Whatever I'm playing at the time!" There's a lot of truth in that, although, if I'm honest, there are some pieces that I keep gravitating back toward, so I suppose I do have a few favorites. Scripture is much the same for me. I've never been one to have a favorite verse or Bible story, and I tend to think whatever passage I'm reading and wrestling with at the moment is my favorite. But again, there are some I keep coming back to... and today's passage is one of those.

I love this passage. It never ceases to delight me, to challenge me. Perhaps I love this passage because of the Jesus it reveals — the Jesus who is, yes, fully divine and yet, at the same time, oh so human.

This story is found in the seventh chapter of Mark's Gospel. In just the previous chapter, we saw Jesus call together his band of disciples, feed the crowds of thousands, walk on water, heal the sick, and get into it with the Pharisees about the nuances of the Law. I imagine, at this point, he's a little tired, and so he sets out for the coast, to the city of Tyre to get a little bit of well-deserved R&R. He really wanted to stay under the radar, but of course someone notices he's there.

Here enters the Syrophenician Woman, one of the many women in the Bible whose name we never bothered to record — forever known by this rather nondescript moniker. We are not told much else about her, but we do know she's a mom and her young daughter is not well. The gospel writer says the girl "had an unclean spirit." So, this nameless woman discovers Jesus has come to town and seizes the opportunity. She shows up, prostrates herself before him, and starts begging. She pleads with Jesus to heal her daughter — at this point in the Gospel, we shouldn't be surprised by this; we already know Jesus is in the business of healing. What *is* surprising is Jesus' reaction. Did you hear what he said? "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

OK. We need to pause here a moment. This is a key moment in this story, and we need to really understand what's happening here. I told you earlier that I love this story because it shows us the Jesus who is both fully God and fully human. This is the place where all that humanity comes tumbling out. Too often, we forget the humanness of Jesus and feel compelled to explain away moments like this one in ways that fit the narrative of "perfect Jesus" who can do no wrong. So, in a story like this, we justify his response as some sort of divine test or deep theological statement that we just don't quite understand. Friends, I will suggest to you that there's not much to overthink here. Jesus was just plain rude.

Now, maybe he was tired after all that work he did in the previous chapter. Maybe he was irritated that someone interrupted his vacation. Maybe he was just having a bad day. Regardless, here he is, facing a desperate woman who has literally flung herself on his mercy to save her daughter, and how does he respond? He calls her a dog. There's no getting around it: This was not a nice thing to say. I'm a dog-lover, but there's no contextualization here that suggests Jesus had similar warm, fuzzies about our canine companions. In his time and place, dogs were not beloved pets. They were scavengers. They were unclean. Every reference to dogs in the Bible is negative. Jesus called this woman a name, and not a nice one.

Actually, it's not clear who he's calling a dog — it could be the mother or it could be the little girl, even more horrifying in my book. Regardless, he goes there. After hearing her plea, he lobs a slur at her in response, making the rejection clear. And then. Then comes my favorite part of the story. This woman — a seemingly nobody — has the audacity to clap back at Jesus. Without missing a beat, she retorts, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

This is one of those moments I desperately wish I could be there to see it unfold firsthand. I really want to see Jesus' expression here. In my mind, his jaw is dropped, and he's momentarily speechless. He did not see that coming. To his credit, though, he hears her, he receives the critique, and he changes course. "Then he said to her, 'For saying that, you may go — the demon has left your daughter.' So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone."

Yes, this story is one of my favorites. It's a rich, dramatic text with layer upon layer to peel back and discover more truths. It's here that we see a very real, very relatable Jesus — one who gets a little cranky, says some things he shouldn't say, but then grows. He initially dismisses and even dehumanizes this woman, but after she demands better from him, he changes his tune and recognizes the sacred worth of both her and her daughter. He sees them fully. He sees the image of God in them.

What do we mean by the image of God? The fancy term for this is *Imago Dei*. This theological concept comes from the first chapter of Genesis where we read, "Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image....'"¹ To say we are created in the image of God says that we inherently reflect or mirror the divine. It tells us something about who we were created to be — what our truest, most actualized self looks like — and it also tells us something about who God is — as seen in our capacity to love, our creativity, and in our beautiful diversity. I had a seminary professor who once said, "There is a part of God I cannot know if I only interact with people like me."

Note that this verse from Genesis says, "Let us make humankind in our image...." This connection between humans and the divine isn't just limited to God, a singular person of the Trinity. Our imaging is directly connected with Christ. Do you recall those words from the beginning of John's Gospel? "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without

¹ Genesis 1:26 (The Inclusive Bible)

him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”²

The incarnation of God as known in Christ Jesus is intertwined with this notion of the image of God. Jesus took on our form, our humanness, but it is also in that embodiment that we can see most clearly this image of God at work. Jesus showed us a way of radical love for all people, and that indiscriminate love is a direct consequence of this notion that each and every one of us has a sacred worth, as we are image-bearers of the Divine.

I took this digression into theology because we have to grapple with the implications of the *Imago Dei*. It's not enough to recognize the image of God that is in each of us. We must also recognize the image of God in everyone else — and realize that recognition has real-world implications for us, if we take it seriously. Jim Wallis wrote in his book *Christ in Crisis*: “How a society treats people is an essentially moral decision. It is also a theological matter. And it reflects our obedience, or not, to the Word of God. To make those personal and political choices about how we treat people, especially those different from us (as we have seen Jesus defining who our neighbor is), it is spiritually vital that we go back to the beginning. Jesus is called the Word of God, and the gospels make it clear that he was there at the beginning. Therefore, how we treat people and why will determine whether we are serious about reclaiming Jesus.”³

Our theology has implications. We talk a lot about civil rights, human rights, equality, and dignity but we don't always understand those discussions to be about our theology. Granted, we might talk about those things in terms of “doing the right thing,” “doing justice,” or even “loving neighbor,” but at the core of it all is this theological foundation of the image of God. If we believe that all people — no matter their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, ability, status, religion, or just who they are in all of the ways that may seem strange or off-putting to us — if we believe that all people are reflections of God, then it is theologically offensive — not just morally repugnant or politically distasteful — it is theologically offensive to denigrate or subjugate anyone. No exceptions.

In practical terms, that means that reclaiming Jesus and this notion of the *Imago Dei* requires us to ensure all people have access to things like housing and food, healthcare, education, economic opportunity, equal justice in our laws and policing, access to voting, and so much more. It requires us to dismantle systems of white supremacy and patriarchy that privilege certain people over others. It requires us to prioritize the needs of the most vulnerable, marginalized, and forgotten. Our public policies reflect our commitment to honoring the image of God in each and every person. I said it last Sunday, and I will say it again: I know of no way to follow Christ that doesn't have political implications. That doesn't mean I'm saying one particular political party or another is aligned with Christ's teachings. In fact, I would suggest these political implications are greater than our narrowly-constructed American political system. What I am saying is that we cannot separate our faith from our public policies.

We saw this play out in that encounter between Jesus and the Syrophenician Woman. Jesus tried to tell her his healing business was only for the people of his nation, not for foreigners like her, but when she confronted him with the truth that she was as much created in the image of

² John 1:1-5 (NRSV)

³ Jim Wallis, *Christ in Crisis: Why We Need to Reclaim Jesus* (HarperOne, 2019), 46

God as the people of Israel, he changed his public policy and extended his ministry to include her too.

On an even more basic level, this belief in the *Imago Dei* affects how we talk about each other. If we are to honor the image of God that is present in every single human being, we cannot use dehumanizing language about any person. I grew up here in Indiana, so that means I am very familiar with our propensity for “Hoosier niceness.” Even still, if you listen closely, there are plenty of slurs and insults thrown around in this state. Some are the obvious ones — racial slurs, offensive language about women, homophobic jokes — but there’s also plenty of subtle, dehumanizing language around here: fat jokes and body shaming, comparing individuals and people groups to animals, political rhetoric demonizing those on the other side of the aisle, failing to use person-first language when we talk about those experiencing homelessness, mental illness, and incarceration, just to name a few. We know that when we use this dehumanizing language, we increase the likelihood of violence toward these persons, and we decrease our empathy toward them. Again, to point us back to our theology, we also deny the image of God. This isn’t about political correctness. This is about theological correctness.

We’re entering into an election season. These times are ripe for dehumanization to become mainstream, and so I offer you an invitation to consider how you will engage this year. Let me be clear: It is right to engage in the political process. It is right for the Church to be a prophetic voice that challenges our leaders. It is right to critique unjust policies and damaging political ideologies. However, it is not right to do any of that through the dehumanization of another human being — even if they are politicians or political rivals. Our words matter.

This week, we lost two great pillars of the American Civil Rights movement, Representative John Lewis and the Rev. Cordy Tindell “C.T.” Vivian. While our country is mourning their deaths and celebrating their legacy, we would do well to remember that it is no accident both of these men were not only political leaders but also religious leaders. Their commitment to liberation and racial justice was inexorably tied to their faith. They understood the implications of the *Imago Dei*, and they lived it out.

In his book *Across the Bridge: Life Lessons and a Vision for Change*, Representative Lewis wrote these words: “Nothing can stop the power of a committed and determined people to make a difference in our society. Why? Because human beings are the most dynamic link to the divine on this planet.”⁴

He’s right. If you want to see God, see your fellow humans. And when we do that, when we see more clearly, nothing can stop us from changing the world.

That is Good News. Thanks be to God.

⁴ John Lewis, *Across the Bridge: Life Lessons and a Vision for Change* (Hachette Books, 2012)