

“Going to the Dogs!”

The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

August 16, 2020

Romans 11:1-2 ~ Matthew 15:21-28

Our gospel lesson today is a remarkable story. If I were in charge of Jesus’ public relations, I’m not sure I would want this story about him getting around. The optics are not good for a guy building a movement on “love your neighbor as yourself” and “love your enemies.” One commentator describes this encounter as “an incident in Jesus’ life when he was caught with his compassion down.”

It has all the features of the racism and sexism and class prejudice that still exist in our day. Jesus and the disciples are all together when this Gentile woman accosts them. *"Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon."* Her daughter was sick. She had a demon, as they called mental illness in those days. Even in our modern, scientific time, mental illness is frightening, isolating, misunderstood, and maligned. *"Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon."* a heart wrenching plea. But Jesus doesn't even answer her ... he doesn't even acknowledge her existence ... he refuses even to hear her cry. Most people, if they were ignored this way would have just walked away. But this woman ... notice how once again the gospel writers don't

even remember her name ... this woman refuses to give up. Finally, the disciples get fed up and urge Jesus, "Send her away."

Do you remember? That's exactly the same thing they said about the hungry crowd in that story we heard a couple of weeks ago, when Jesus fed the five thousand. That seems their solution to every human problem which confronts them. "Send them away." People like "this woman" interrupt our flow and ask something of us that we may not be able to give. They cause problems. We wish they would just go away. We hope they will just go away. But they won't just go away.

This woman didn't go away, so Jesus put her off, explaining, "*I was sent to the lost house of Israel.*" It was a boundary issue. She wasn't one of "them" ... she was one of "those." In those days Jews had good reason to avoid Gentiles. Their scripture said the Gentiles were impure and should be avoided. We religious people are always tempted to prize purity over compassion and use scripture for permission to reject people in need. It's a lot easier than dealing with them! After all, Gentiles were dangerous ... they had done some horrible things. And Gentiles were strange ... they ate pork and shellfish ... they mixed meat and dairy ... they worshipped idols ... they jabbered in strange languages. They were different ... just plain weird. Jesus came to be the Messiah of the Jews. The Gentiles weren't even expecting a Messiah. They weren't the chosen people. God's promises weren't for them.

But this woman didn't know when to quit. "*Lord, help me!*" she prayed. When you're desperate, the boundaries don't matter ... and her love for her daughter made this woman desperate. Jesus persisted. "*It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.*" Dogs! That's the racial insult that Jews used for Gentiles. They thought "Those Gentiles live like dogs. They eat like dogs. They bark like dogs. They have the morals of dogs. They're all dogs." Dehumanizing a whole group of people gives us permission to neglect, abuse, or even annihilate them. That's the way prejudice works.

Jesus doesn't actually call this woman a dog, but it's very close. What Jesus is saying isn't lost on the disciples or this woman either. He turned up the volume big time on his refusal to help. This was an insult. The Jews are God's children ... she is a dog.

But still this woman wouldn't give up. "*Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.*" And here comes the big surprise ... Jesus was moved ... Jesus was impressed ... Jesus changed his mind! Remember "little faith" from last week? Jesus called Simon Peter "little faith," "puny-faith," "teenie-weenie faith," when Peter jumped out of the boat and sank like a rock. This week, just a few verses later, Jesus called this woman - "great faith," "mega faith," "super-duper faith," ... and she wasn't even a member of his church! Doesn't it just "gall y'all" when an outsider shows more faith in God than you do?

But what's so great about this woman's faith? It's not just about belief. She believed Jesus could help her when the conversation began. It's about her faithfulness. It's about her not giving up. Ignored, neglected, rejected, insulted, she persisted.

Still, this story troubled me, and there's no easy way around it. I wished that Peter had said these awful things to her so that Jesus could come to her rescue at the last moment ... but no. Jesus, the Son of God, the Word made Flesh, our Savior ... ignores her ... rejects her ... insults her ... all but calls her a Gentile dog, and finally answers her. This is not the Jesus we usually see. What do we do with that?

I place no credence in those who explain, "Well, outsiders are dogs. Only we insiders are God's chosen children." Those people don't get it. But Paul got it. He said, *"There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus"* (Gal 3:28).

And I get no satisfaction from the people who claim Jesus was just leading her along in order to teach the disciples a lesson ... that he knew all along that he would heal her daughter ... but that he's playing her for the disciple's sake. That seems like cruel and arbitrary exploitation to me. You don't treat people that way, especially when they are wounded and desperate. Those people don't get it. But Paul got it. He said, *"So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all ..."* (Gal 6:10).

The only explanation I find satisfactory for Jesus' behavior in this story is that Jesus learned something from this woman about racism and sexism, and then he changed because of this encounter with her and because of that I have grown to love and appreciate this encounter. It shines a light on the humanity of Jesus. And how his view of the other was shaped by his culture ... a culture built on racial and ethnic hierarchy. He thought he understood his ministry to be just to the Jews and not to the Gentiles. And his narrow understanding prevented him in the moment from seeing the full humanity and needs of the desperate Canaanite woman kneeling in front of him.

We can become blind to the humanity and the needs of people who are not like us ... people who do not look, think, or talk like us. Like our Savior, we can get it wrong. We can make negative generalizations about whole groups of people based on one encounter. But thankfully, we can also get our minds changed. The persistent woman shakes up how Jesus understands his call to ministry. She helps him see his own bias and that her life mattered. And in today's world, I am encouraged that even Jesus can get his mind changed about something that really matters ... and more importantly someone who really matters. Jesus gets his mind changed by his close encounter because what was at stake was at the heart of God.

So, I wonder if the woman's daughter isn't the only person healed in this gospel story ... maybe Jesus ends up being healed, too ... healed from his prejudice in

that moment, and his eyes opened to the racism inherent in his culture. Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman changes him not just in that moment, but it changes the future and shape of his ministry. Earlier in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus sends out the disciples telling them NOT to go to the Gentiles or to Samaria. By the end of the gospel of Matthew, he sends them out to make disciples of "all nations," or "all ethnicities" and to the ends of the earth. His new perspective frees him to respond, to heal, to serve as the channel of God's redeeming presence. Until he encountered the woman, even Jesus had not yet realized how expansive God's kingdom is ... and how inclusive God's grace is. He did not realize that racism was in the groundwater of his culture. And the experience of having his mind changed made all the difference and was a turning point in his ministry.

Yes, I believe this woman showed Jesus that women and Gentiles were God's beloved people, too. I believe that Jesus learned, or rather unlearned what his culture had given him. And, whatever your understanding of God in Christ ... unless Jesus was capable of learning and changing ... of growing and gaining through conversation with other people ... he was not truly human. But I believe that he was. And I believe that he gave us an example here of what it means to learn ... what it means to change ... what it means to work on our own stuff ... what it means to grow in God's grace. Just when we think we know where the boundaries of our concern are ... where the scope of our ministry is, what the

bounds of our neighborhood are, the kinds of people we care about ... the circle is drawn wider. And the circle of God's care is wider, larger, deeper, than even Jesus realized.

And even if you don't like the idea that Jesus needed to learn anything at this stage of his life, I would argue that you and I do ... no matter what stage of life we're in. Because if we don't understand that we are desperate and the only prayer we've got left is "Lord, help me," then we are clueless. If we don't understand that we are the desperate dog in this story begging for a crumb of grace ... that we don't deserve to be here, but God has let us in ... then we just don't get it.

We're all still under construction. God is helping us build up our souls. And one way that happens is by caring for and communicating with others ... even those who are different. We can be a little paternalistic towards the people who come to us needing help. We talk about the church's ministry to the poor and outcast as if we are not poor and outcast and that they are not actually part of us. But we're the dogs in this story. Everybody in here is a dog to somebody and an infidel ... because of our race ... because of our gender ... because we're UCC ... because we're American, whatever. There's something about each of us that somebody doesn't like, and they don't include us. But God includes us. And God includes them, too, whether we like it or not. According to the book of Acts, it wasn't long after Pentecost that some Gentiles became believers, too. They had a big fight

about it in the early church, and churches are still fighting about such things today but ... isn't it great! ... the gospel went to the dogs almost from the start.

So, if somebody comes to our church, tell them we're still under construction. Tell them we're trying to do what is right, even if it's not always popular. Welcome them in the name of Christ, whoever they are. And if somebody asks you how our church is doing, you just tell them we're going to the dogs, in Jesus' name.

May we pray?

Jesus, Savior, make us like you. Give us the courage to welcome the stranger, to hear their cry, to change and grow because of our encounter with them. Give us the discipline for the hard work of learning and teach us today to confront our own prejudice and overcome it. And Lord, let us remember we were once dogs, but now we are your children by your grace alone. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Amen.