

## Food for the dogs

Jesus and his disciples had been busy. By this point in the Matthew's gospel, Jesus had healed many people, cast out demons, and taught in the synagogues. He had sent his disciples out on their first mission trip, instructing them to heal and teach and proclaim the good news of the kingdom just as he had been doing. Jesus had recently fed the crowd of five thousand on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, and last week we heard the story of the disciples crossing the sea, encountering the storm, and Jesus walking out on the water. When they reached the shore, crowds of people came to him and once more calm to the wind and the waves. When they reached the other shore, crowds of people came to Jesus and asked him to help all those who were sick, and he healed them.

Yes, Jesus and his disciples had been very busy. So, they decided to get away for a while and set off for the region of Tyre and Sidon. It was a long journey, traveling into foreign territory, a land populated mostly by Gentiles. It is as far away from Galilee and Jerusalem as Jesus ever traveled in his ministry. In Mark's version of the story, he explains that Jesus did not want anyone to know he was there. I am speculating here, but I think if Jesus owned a cell phone back then, he would have turned it off for this trip. It is what we might call a retreat, or vacation. We have all had times like this. Times when we want to get away from our daily work and we take some time off – maybe even 3 months off for a sabbatical!

But Jesus could not escape notice, even far away in the region of Tyre and Sidon. There was a woman in the country who heard that Jesus was there. This woman had a little girl who was ill. The woman was a Canaanite, a Gentile; even so, she sought out this Jewish rabbi. She was desperate because of her daughter so she came to Jesus and began to shout out loud for him to help her. "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David. My daughter is tormented by a demon." Jesus did not answer her at all. He ignored her. The disciples urged Jesus to send this woman away because she kept shouting at them.

He gives the kind of response that we don't want our nice, gentle Jesus to give. He says to the woman, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." The message is clear: I have work enough among the Jews, feeding and healing and teaching them. You are a Gentile, and I am on vacation. I can relate to this. There is a

reason why most clergy do not wear their clericals when they are traveling. Personally, I don't want to have a theological discussion with some stranger when I am on an airplane with my wife. I am not looking to do pastoral work when I am on vacation or enjoying dinner in a restaurant with friends.

But the woman is persistent. She kneels before Jesus, and pleads, "Lord, help me." Jesus is firm; in fact, he is even harsher than before. "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." I came to feed the children of Israel. It would not be right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs. The message is clear, "And you, ma'am, are a dog. There is nothing for you here."

Ouch! Did you hear that? Here is a woman, begging for the health of her tormented daughter, and Jesus says, "Let the children, my own people, the Jews, be fed. I am not going to take their food and give it to non-Jews, the dogs."

I wonder how the disciples would have reacted. After all, they were there to get some rest, too, and didn't want to be bothered with this woman. For me, and I think for most of us, these are harsh words coming from our beloved Jesus. Jesus, the one who was a friend to the poor and the outcast and the sinner.

Over the years, I have read how a number of Biblical scholars and Christian writers attempt to put a more gentle spin on this story; I think they are trying to protect Jesus' reputation. Some scholars explain out that it was common for Jews to call Gentiles dogs, so Jesus was simply using the language of his culture and meant no offense. I don't buy that explanation Others have pointed out that the word Jesus uses here can actually be translated "little dogs," perhaps an equivalent of our word "puppies." As if that somehow made it okay for Jesus to say, "Hey, you *little* mutt, get away from me." Suppose I were in desperate need on behalf of my child, and I was told my family would get nothing because we are from way out in Midvale, and we are a bunch of dogs. It wouldn't make it any better if I was told I was a little dog, or big dog, or any kind of dog at all. Another author suggests that Jesus spoke this way to the woman in order to test, or teach, his disciples. This writer contends that Jesus was planning on helping the woman all along, but he wanted to see what his disciples would do. Really? To use this worried, anxious woman, and call her a derogatory name just so you can give a lesson to your buddies, well, that doesn't sit right with me either.

No, I believe we can read this gospel lesson as it stands. Don't dilute it with word games, or obscure meanings. I think this story says what it says. Jesus was tired, he had been working and healing, and feeding and teaching, and he traveled to get away from it all, in a place where no one was supposed to bother him. And when a Gentile woman comes up to him for help, Jesus offers a rather human response. "Woman, you are not part of my flock. I came for my own people, and heaven knows I have work enough to do there. I have just fed five thousand of my own. It wouldn't be right to take food away from the children who are already sitting at the table and toss it to the dogs." These may not be the nicest words that Jesus ever spoke, but I am going to trust Matthew that they are honest.

Next comes the pivotal moment of the whole the story. Here is this woman, whose daughter is ill, and she has made her way to seek out a rabbi, someone outside her own tradition and culture. She hopes that perhaps he can offer some help or healing. And Jesus, has told her It isn't right to give the children's food to the dogs. In response, this woman offers this gutsy reply, "Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

She was telling Jesus that, frankly, he was wrong. She challenged Jesus – Jesus, who could engage in a verbal challenge with anyone – scribes, pharisees, synagogue leaders. And along comes this foreigner, and a *woman*, no less, and she gives Jesus something to think about. "You know, rabbi, even if it is only crumbs and leftovers that fall from your table, the dogs would eat that. The deserve to be fed, too. Now then, how are you going to treat me? A woman with a daughter who is sick. Will you help? Will you reach this far?"

And Jesus hears her and sees her. Jesus doesn't say, "Woman, you just embarrassed me in front of my friends." He doesn't say, "Hey, I'm the Messiah, don't you dare presume to correct me." No, Jesus recognizes that this woman has what he would want any good Jew to have, faith; more than that, she's got chutzpah. This woman, who just interrupted his retreat, just taught Jesus a thing or two. Jesus then said to her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." In Mark's gospel, Jesus declares, "Woman, for saying what you just told me, you may go, the demon has left your daughter." Jesus was telling this foreigner, "You are right. Go in peace." And the woman's daughter was healed that very moment, just as Jesus promised.

The woman's response was not only a turning point in her story, it was also a kind of turning point in Jesus' story as well. Right after the encounter with this courageous woman, Jesus and the disciples leave that place to travel back near the Sea of Galilee, to what most scholars believe is still Gentile country. Once more, great crowds come to him, and they bring those who are blind, and deaf, and lame, and Jesus heals them. Even though they are Gentiles. And Jesus spends three whole days with them, healing, and teaching about the kingdom of God, which now seems to reach even further, reaching out to Gentiles, to that Canaanite woman, and all the foreigners who now gathered around him.

After those three days, Jesus sees that this crowd is hungry, and he works another miracle feeding a great crowd – four thousand people. Here in this foreign setting, Jesus took a small offering of bread and fish, he gave thanks for it, broke it, gave it to them this crowd that had gathered all around him, and everyone was satisfied, and there were basketfuls left over. Jesus feeds the four thousand foreigners in the same way he had earlier fed five thousand Jews – with compassion and with abundance. When Jesus first encountered the woman, he said, “I only came to feed the children, it isn't right to give anything to the dogs.” Now, Jesus is breaking bread and giving and sharing the food to *everyone*, knowing that all of them are God's children.

In next week's gospel lesson, the story continues, because after the feeding the four thousand, while Jesus and his disciples are still in Gentile country, there is the powerful story of Peter's confession of that Jesus is the Christ. Isn't that interesting? In Matthew's entire gospel, the clearest pronouncement of who Jesus is takes place not in Jerusalem, not among the children of Israel, but out there, among *those* people, the ones that used to be called dogs.

One might say, I would say, that Jesus had a change of mind and heart from his encounter with the Canaanite woman. This doesn't diminish my view of Jesus in the least. It shows us that Jesus was human, one of us. It reveals that Jesus, fully divine and fully human, could have his eyes and heart open in a new way. Luke once wrote of Jesus, “He increased in wisdom and in years, in divine and human favor.” Jesus had that wonderful human attribute that he was always willing to learn. Perhaps this woman helped Jesus see a bigger picture of God, and larger vision of who is named as God's children. An understanding that the kingdom of God was meant for the whole world – not just for his own people, because everyone is a child of God. Everyone is called to eat at the table. This is why in our tradition everyone is

welcome to receive communion. All are invited to share in the banquet that God is offering. All are offered God's love, and healing, and hope and joy.

Sometimes in our busy lives, we get stuck in our way of seeing. We see ourselves and others in the same way we always have. We tend to dismiss new ideas, or new people, simply because they are different from what we have always known. This is a very human response; it's easy to fall into this familiar pattern. But this story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman reminds us that like Jesus, we are being given the opportunity to see the world, and all God's people, in a new way.

In these days, when there is so much division and hate, we may wonder what we can do. Well, the old wisdom says that if you want to change the world, start by changing yourself. Ask yourself: "How do you see people who are different from you? How do you see the stranger? Who are the people you struggle to be compassionate toward? Who are the individuals you have called a dog, or even worse? Are you willing to see things in a new way?" This gospel story tells us that seeing one person in a new way can change everything. It might be the way God's grace reaches a little further into this world.

In our collect this morning we prayed that we may follow daily in the blessed steps of Jesus' most holy life. That is a good prayer. May God open our hearts and eyes as we follow Jesus. Amen.

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Trace Browning

Proper 15, 12<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – Year A

Isaiah 56:1,6-8 • Psalm 67 • Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32 • Matthew 15:10-28

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