

“The Gospel that Goes to the Dogs”

Introduction: I wonder, as you sit here this morning, who would you be overjoyed to see walk into this sanctuary next Sunday? A family member who’s been going through a rough time and you’ve been praying for? A classmate or teacher from your school? A neighbor with whom you’ve been having spiritual discussions? These are people you are likely to welcome with enthusiasm.

Now, who might make you uncomfortable if you were to see them walk into this space?! Someone who has opposed you at town meeting or spread slander about you? Someone you know is living a morally compromised life? Someone who supports a different political party than you do? What kind of welcome would you be able to give them?

The fact of the matter is that as we seek to bring the good news about Jesus in word and deed to others, we might very well have people walk into the doors of our church who might cause us a little discomfort. Just how wide open are you willing to have our doors be?

This morning we meet a woman who was seeking to pry those doors open just a wee bit wider. In the process, she seems to cause Jesus some discomfort. She also exhibits a stubborn (in a good way) faith in the breadth of God’s mercy. As he shares this episode with us, Mark helps us to see what can happen when the good news goes to the dogs! [READ]

I. The Approach of the Woman

A. As the text opens, we find Jesus still looking for a quiet spot to rest, and to grieve, since receiving news that a relative, John the Baptist, had been beheaded by King Herod. But a crowd had followed him into the Galilee region, which he ended up miraculously feeding, then he’d needed to rescue his disciples who had gotten stuck in a storm on the sea, and then some religious leaders from Jerusalem had turned up and were wondering what he was all about, so, he wasn’t finding much rest! When he did seem to finally find a house at which to retreat, way up north in the vicinity of the beautiful seacoast town of Tyre (vrbo?!), word leaked out and Jesus was interrupted yet again.

B. This time it was by a woman who was in great need. Her little girl was possessed by an unclean spirit, and she was desperately reaching out to Jesus for help. This woman is a Gentile, living in a city that, over the years, has been hostile toward Jews. She knows that she is considered by Jews to be unclean, and that she has none of the religious or moral or cultural credentials needed to approach a Jewish rabbi. And yet, in a burst of boldness, she enters the house without an invitation and falls at the feet of Jesus, begging him to rescue her daughter from this demon.

C. We don’t know how she found Jesus, but it is interesting that she comes to him because just a few miles up the road was a temple to the pagan god of healing, Eshmun. Perhaps she had started there but had gotten nowhere. Suffice it to say that there is nothing like a mother with an ill child. Parents, Tim Keller observes, are not really on the spectrum from cowardice to courage. If your child is in jeopardy, you’ll do whatever it takes, you’ll go anywhere, to save her. This mother was at end of her rope, and it’s a place Jesus so often meets us.

II. The Response of Jesus

A. And yet – one of the many surprises in this text – Jesus doesn't seem so keen on helping her. In his telling of this episode, Matthew actually says this after the woman's plea: "Jesus did not answer a word" (Ma. 15:23). Her request, it seems, was causing Jesus to ponder, even to wrestle, with how, or even whether, to respond. And when he does, it's in a rather insulting way: "First let the children eat all they want, for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs." Yikes! Really, Jesus? Know that in his day, dogs were mostly wild and dirty scavengers, and the Jews (referred to as "children" in this text), often called the Gentiles "dogs" because they were thought to be unclean. His response might be softened a bit when we learn that the word Jesus uses for "dogs" here is one that means "puppies," and so can indicate a household pet, but that still doesn't leave Jesus sounding very kind.

B. One helpful note is found in the word *first*. "First," Jesus begins, "let the children eat all they want." There is, in other words, an order to the mission of Jesus. He did not come to heal everyone he met but came as the fulfillment of God's promise to bless the world through the nation of Israel, the people from whom Jesus came. It's a promise that was recorded all the way back in Genesis 12, a promise Jesus was giving Israel time to recognize and enter into. His priority was to the "children," to the "lost sheep of Israel" (Ma. 15:24). After his resurrection, the fullness of his mission would come into view as he instructed his disciples to go to all nations.

C. However, this fact does not seem to remove the struggle from Jesus. Should he act on behalf of this woman's plea, even though it seemed like it would be getting things out of order? I must admit that I'm not totally resolved on this, but I don't think it's a bad thing to see Jesus wrestle a bit about what to do. We may need to ask: Does our theological commitment to the divinity of Jesus push too far away the reality of his humanity? Does it mean he's always nice, and never gets tired, irritated, or puzzled, or that he never wrestled with how to respond to someone? As we saw last week, Jesus both reoriented the source of our purity, and has just finished removing the clean/unclean distinction that the religious leaders had been making between Jew and Gentile, about who gets excluded or included as the people of God, and now he is having to meet that challenge personally, head on, face to face, wondering, maybe, how it's going to look in practice.

III. The Faith of the Woman

A. Jesus is helped along, it seems, in his own thinking, by the wonderfully and refreshingly stubborn faith of the woman, who responds: "Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs" (v. 28). Humbly, but brilliantly, she answers from within the parable, using the terms Jesus used. She shows better understanding of the words of Jesus than most Jews or disciples who we meet in the gospels who constantly seem to struggle to understand. She may know that it may not be her time, but she prays anyway. She prays not – "Lord, give me what I deserve on the basis of my goodness," but "Lord, give me what I don't deserve, on the basis of your goodness." She rests, and makes her plea, that he go out of order, on the basis of his mercy. As we put it each Sunday: "Lord, in your mercy, hear my prayer."

B. The *Book of Common Prayer* has an approach to the Lord's Supper based on this text:

We do not presume to come to this your table, merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table, but you are the same Lord whose property is always to have mercy.

C. To this Gentile woman, Jesus responds with healing mercy. He loves her heart. He loves her logic. He loves her humility. He loves her trust that the covenant God of Israel, while taking care of his children, also had good news that could reach the dogs under the table, good news that included her.

Maybe in its most basic form, the faith we see displayed in this woman is the stubborn belief she has in the wideness of God's mercy. It's not unlike the men who dig through a roof in order to let their friend down in front of Jesus, or the woman who pushes through a crowd in order to touch the garment of Jesus, or the widow who comes day after day to lay her case before the judge. In each case, Jesus found such faith irresistible.

May we not be afraid to step into this woman's shoes and approach Jesus boldly, trusting that he is the God who loves to show mercy, a God who opens the door of his kingdom wider, or in a different order, than we might ever imagine.