

“Going to the Dogs”
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Matthew 15:21-28

This morning’s Gospel text is one of those that I sometimes wish was just not included in the Bible. It’s one of those times when I wish Jesus had just not said this. I read this text and I think about Jesus’s overall message to us, I ask, “How can Jesus act like that? What is going on here?” I imagine some of you are asking that question, as well. A woman comes to Jesus, asking for help for her tormented daughter, and of course, Jesus is going to help her, right? But, no, his response is not like the Jesus we expect. He says, essentially, “It’s not my problem.” It reminds me of the scene when a wedding party ran out of wine, and the mother of Jesus mentioned it to Him. His reply was “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?” That’s another not-so-stellar moment for Jesus, when He doesn’t respond the way we think he will. In today’s passage, he is actually pretty mean and insulting to this woman, who is just seeking help for her daughter. Why? Why does Jesus act in such a *non-Jesus* way?

There are some theories. These are some ways that various commentators have tried to get Jesus off the hook. They attempt to explain it for us in a way that makes Jesus seem nicer. My friend Rev. Dr. Delmer Chilton, a Lutheran pastor in North Carolina, breaks these down into three categories: the “He didn’t really mean it” approach, the “He didn’t really say it” approach, and the “We don’t really get it” approach. In the first approach, the idea is that Jesus is actually doing an acted-out parable. Jesus responds to the woman by saying the things that the disciples likely would, in an attempt to get them to see the folly of their ways. There are variations on this approach, with the woman either being in on the lesson or not. Those adhering to this view say

that Jesus didn't really mean what He was saying to the woman and He planned all along to make it right in the end. It was all just a teaching moment for the benefit of the disciples.

In the second approach, commentators say that this didn't really take place; that the whole exchange was made up by Matthew in his gospel. They say that this has more to do with Matthew and *his* beliefs than with Jesus, since this never happened anyway. No need to really focus on it much, because Jesus didn't really say it.

Then, there are those who say that Jesus said it, but it wasn't really an insult. They say that this wasn't really Jesus insulting the woman, but was rather witty banter between the two. One commentator says "It is good peasant humor, not theological debate." The theory is that it was a Jewish idiom, like "the early bird gets the worm." People today aren't insulted that you are calling them a bird, and this theory goes that the woman wasn't insulted by Jesus calling her a dog, because it was a Jewish idiom that we just don't get today. So, this approach goes that Jesus did say it, but we just don't get it today.

And all three of those possibilities are somewhat plausible, though they all have their flaws. I'll tell you what I think, though. I think that it wasn't any of those three. Those three are all attempts to get Jesus off the hook. They are all trying to find ways around the difficult words that Jesus said. Here's what I think. I think Jesus called the woman a dog, and He meant it. And I think that Jesus changed His mind because of the woman's great faith. How can I say that? Am I worried that lightning is going to strike me? No. You see, we affirm that Jesus was fully human and fully divine. It's a logical inconsistency, but it's something we contend with in our faith. We affirm that there are things we can't understand, and this is one. It's something we really can't wrap our minds around – fully human and fully divine – and we generally tend to lean towards the fully divine side. We think of Jesus as perfect at all times, compassionate at all times, all-knowing at all times. But that is to ignore the fully human side of Jesus. We don't see Jesus, the man who lived and breathed here on earth, as a product of His times and subject to the thinking of His day, which

had clear lines for who was in or out. But if Jesus was fully human, then that implies that He could change and grow. Luke records that Jesus grew in wisdom and stature. If Jesus grew in wisdom, then He could be changed by His encounters. And I think that this was such an encounter. Up until this point, it seems that Jesus understood His mission in more limited terms than He later would. The world of Jesus' day had taught Him to put up walls, and that day, God used a woman with a sick child to tear down those walls.

That's what I think. I don't know. What I do know is that Jesus is later shown to go beyond the geographic and ethnic limits of Israel and Judaism. Throughout the rest of the New Testament, it is made clear that the Good News is Good News not just for Jews, but also for Gentiles. Jesus told the disciples to make disciples of all nations. Paul's letters speak of the barriers between Jew and Gentile coming down. Revelation says "All nations will come and worship before you..." The gospel is for all, and it is up to us to ensure that all have a chance to hear the good news.

This story is a painful reminder to us about the prejudice in our own lives. This story shows us the pervasiveness of prejudice in all societies – in Jesus' day, and our own day. We have seen those prejudices all-too clearly recently.

Pastor Chuck Currie says that before going to seminary he worked for about 17 years with programs that addressed issues of homelessness.

The first shelter he worked at once conducted an experiment to chronicle the different ways homeless people are treated compared to those of greater means.

On a downtown city side street they parked a van that contained a hidden camera. One of the residents of their shelter, dressed in donated clothing from their clothing room, got out of the van and collapsed on the sidewalk. Chuck Currie reports that people literally stepped over this homeless man. People walked past. People averted their eyes. Because of his poverty, this man became invisible to people many of whom you would suspect are Christians.

Perhaps you can guess how the story ends. The man got up and returned to the van and changed into a business suit. He got back out of the van and once again collapsed on the sidewalk. People rushed to his aid. He was no longer invisible.

He was no longer a stranger. He was no longer the despised Canaanite.”¹

Our eyes need to be continually re-opened to the reality that all people are God’s children. Just as Jesus’ mission grew to include Gentiles as well as Jews, our mission must ever expand to include those who have been left out.

On the other side of this encounter, we have a wonderful example to follow. This Canaanite mother becomes an example of great faith, of persistence in the face of injustice. She is the only person in the whole New Testament who is said to have “great faith.” Jesus remarks on the “little faith” of the disciples from time to time, but only this outsider is said to have “great faith.” According to the societal rules of the day, this woman should not even have been speaking with Jesus – an unknown man. But, even though she wasn’t a Jew, she recognized Jesus as the Messiah, and knew that He could not, in the end, deny her request. Her persistence was a result of her “great faith.” It is a wonderful example for us all of persevering, of assertively and respectfully standing up for yourself and for your loved ones, of not giving up even when the road is difficult.

The message of this wonderful mother is even when you do not feel you are allowed to have faith, have it anyway. Even when you do not feel that God loves you, believe it anyway. Even when you feel that you are an outsider, include yourself anyway. Even the dogs get the crumbs that fall from the master’s table.

We can learn a great deal from this interaction. When we are on the side of the insider, we must open the door to welcome in the outsider. We must live lives of welcome and love for the other, tearing down the walls that separate us. And when we are on the outside, we must persevere and live with “great faith,” working also to tear down those walls. Whatever side of the

¹ **Send Her Away!** by King Duncan

walls we are on, we must continue, to peacefully and persistently grow in faith and love, ever expanding our vision, so that all are included. May we all strive to hear Jesus commend us for our “great faith.” Amen