

Sermon: Matthew 15:21-28, Romans 12:9-21 © Kate Heichler; preached Christ Church La Plata/Wayside
"A Dog's Faith" Pentecost 14 (A), Sunday, September 3, 2023

*Almighty God, Source of all, Living Word, Holy Spirit:
may your Word only be spoken, and Your voice only be heard. Amen.*

Let love be genuine; ... love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ... Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

This is what St. Paul wrote to the church in Rome, exhorting them to let their faith in Jesus Christ show in the way they treated others. So he exhorts us. But in the story we heard today, do we see this in Jesus and his disciples? They try to get rid of this poor woman, Jesus at first denies her request, in effect saying she was not his problem. She was a foreigner – not a “chosen people.” Mark, who told this story first, refers to her as a Syro-Phoenician Greek – clearly, a Gentile. But Matthew goes further, using the archaic term “Canaanite,” to flag for his readers the Canaan of the Old Testament, the promised land, whose residents were off-limits to the people of Israel – people they were to conquer, not mix with.

Canaan was that land on the east coast of the Mediterranean that encompasses what we now know of as Lebanon, southern Syria, Palestine west of the Jordan. Sound familiar? A land where the relationship of Jew to Gentile continues to seethe and simmer, and often boil over.

This woman first approaches Jesus – very bold, for a woman of her time and place. She shouts; she uses his Messianic titles – “Lord, Son of David!” That’s code for: “I know who you are! I know the power you have! I know you can help me!”

She persists when he ignores her, undaunted by his disciples’ dismissal. She throws herself into the dirt, kneeling, crying, “Lord, help me!” She too is very focused on her mission: getting deliverance for her daughter, beset by demons. Imagine a mother today, watching her beloved girl move from alcohol to drugs in a shame-fueled downward spiral. She refuses to be insulted by his reply, which seems to equate her people with dogs. And she is quick, but polite, to run his reply back on him: “Yes but, even the dogs get the crumbs that fall from the table. Even the dogs get the leftovers.” She knows that even Jesus’ leftovers are powerful enough to heal her daughter; she’s not asking for a feast; she knows a crumb is enough.

That gets Jesus' attention – he knows the truth of it. Isn't he the one who said that a mere mustard seed of real faith can move mountains?

And whether he was just testing her, as some scholars have suggested –

BC Eydtt told me this week that here is a Jewish custom that a prospective convert's interest must be rejected three times before they can begin the formal process of conversion – maybe?

Or whether he was in a surly mood, as a plainer reading of the text suggests, here he is being reminded of real faith by an outsider, and he can't deny her faith.

This woman refused to be defined by hostility or misfortune or rejection.

She had faith to see the bigger picture; she knew all she needed was a crumb, and her faith in that crumb ensured her a place at the banquet table for all time.

We too have been invited to that table, to that feast we partake of in part with our morsels of bread and sips of wine that contain the fullness of God-life.

One day we will be sitting at that table with that woman, with Jesus,

and with a whole lot of foreigners and outcasts and even people we don't like – and they will be our sisters and brothers.

We begin that feast in the here and now.

Let's look not only at who is at that table, but who is under it, waiting for crumbs.

This woman does not take offense at being compared to a dog – she goes with it.

“Sure, call me a dog, but even dogs get fed.”

This woman's faith and good nature is like that of a dog –

our dogs who ask persistently for us to feed them,

who come back for pets no matter what mood we're in;

who model unconditional love. As the bumper sticker says,

“God, let me be the person my dog thinks I am.”

You could do a lot worse than being compared to a dog.

How is your faith like that of a dog, or of this woman who believes in Jesus' power to heal her daughter, though she is not one of “his people?”

Who persistently asks for what she needs?

Where is God inviting you to persist in prayer,

though it doesn't feel an answer is coming?

Where is God inviting you to meet rejection with grace instead of reactivity?

Where is God inviting you to model unconditional love?

And where is God inviting you to open yourself to someone

very different from you?

I once heard a rabbi speak from a Jewish perspective about that time when we know we are at the end of the ages, when Messiah has come. She said tradition has it that one mark of that age will be that “causeless love” will be rampant. “Causeless love,” love that isn’t repaying anything or trying to get something. It could have been a Christian sermon on God’s total, unearned grace – and I thought, “Wow, I believe we are in that age, and that Messiah has come.” For me, his name is Jesus, and he demonstrated the most pure, “causeless love” the world has ever known. In the story we heard today, though, he first received that love from a stranger, an annoying woman with tremendous faith, who believed that even his crumbs could heal; a woman who demonstrated a dog’s faith and earned Jesus’ greatest praise: “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” In other words, “Your faith has made your daughter well.”

The world will get know who that Messiah is when they see us showing our faith like that woman did, trusting in the power in even a crumb of the bread of Life; when they see that our faith offers a bigger picture, beyond all the woes that set us back, beyond pandemics and racism and polarization – to love. That’s how Jesus will be made known to the world – through us living out our faith like dogs with a bone; demonstrating love without cause, love without end.

Amen.

Matthew 15:21-28

Jesus left Gennesaret and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a **Canaanite** woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, **Lord, Son of David**; my daughter is tormented by a demon." But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." He answered, "**I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.**" But she came and knelt before him, saying, "**Lord, help me.**" He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She said, "**Yes, Lord**, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, **great is your faith!** Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

Romans 12:9-21

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.