



The Gospel Goes to the Dogs

Matthew 15:21-28

August 14, 2005

Question: Why would an agnostic dyslexic come to church?

Answer: To see if there really is a Dog.

The title of this message is “The Gospel Goes to the Dogs.” A desperate mother asks Jesus to heal her daughter, and Jesus in effect calls the woman a dog. This is so unlike his dealings with other women. Jesus was great with the woman at the well, and with Mary Magdalene, and with Mary and Martha. But with this Canaanite woman, Jesus is more like that Ted Danson character on TV; he is more like Dr. Becker than he is like the Great Physician.

When this desperate mother pleads with Jesus for her daughter, Jesus ignores her. A second time, when the disciples come to Jesus and say, “Please do something about her,” he says, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” And a third time, when the woman comes, *kneels* before him, and pleads, “Lord help me,” Jesus says only, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

We preachers *really* don’t like this passage. We try to harmonize it with other texts. We say he was just joking, or he was just testing her. But a careful, conservative reading of the scripture does not support those theories.

What in God’s name is going on here? I believe we are standing before one of the deep mysteries about who Jesus is: the mystery of how Jesus is fully human and at the same time fully divine. The Scriptures says that Jesus was tempted in all ways like every other human being. (Hebrews 4:15) Every now and then isn’t it tempting to say, “Just leave me alone!?” But the Scriptures also say that, tempted in all ways as we, Jesus nevertheless overcame temptation. At first, Jesus is so human toward the woman, so much like one of us. But by the end of the story, Jesus is so divine that he performs a miracle. So human, and yet so divine.

We are also standing before the mystery of what happens when a human being and Jesus meet each other in an honest, unfiltered, unrestrained encounter. Wherever and whenever a human being and the divine being meet, something is going to happen. Wherever a human being and Jesus meet, somebody is going to change. That is exactly what happened when this Canaanite woman met Jesus. In fact, everybody involved in this encounter changes, including the bystanders. The disciples change. The woman changes. Even Jesus changes.

Dare I say it? Jesus is changed by his encounter with this desperate woman. That sounds a bit brazen until you consider the alternative. In Jesus' day and time, the Greeks had a cold view of what a god was like. They believed that a god was a being that was impassive -- unchanged and unaffected by human influences. Nothing a human being could do could ever ruffle the feelings of the gods.

But that is not the God of the Bible. The God of Scripture was so involved with the Hebrew people that God had a tender place in God's heart for them. But then, you all know the risk of caring about people; inevitably, people will let you down. Remember the big let-down between God and the Hebrews at Mount Sinai? God had just saved them out of Egypt. God had just given Moses the Ten Commandments. And before Moses could take the tablets down the mountain, the people began worshipping a golden calf. And God saw red, and told Moses, "Stand back. I'm going to wipe them off the face of the earth." (paraphrase of Exodus 32:10-11)

But Moses stepped between God and the people and said, "If you do that, the whole world will say that you brought us out here just to kill us. And what about the promise you made to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, your promise to make your people as numerous as the stars in the sky?" And at that point, guess what God did? "And the Lord *changed his mind* about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people." (Exodus 32:14) The King James Version says it even stronger: "...the Lord *repented* of the evil which he thought to do unto his people." You can look it up for yourself. It is amazing language about the Holy One.

What does this tell us? God is affected by us. Sometimes that's bad news. But by the same token, that is good news to anyone who desperately needs God to hear their prayers and be affected enough to act.

Now back to Jesus and that desperate Canaanite mother. Apparently Jesus was going to ignore her request, perhaps because he wanted to be left alone, or perhaps because he was not yet ready to extend his ministry beyond his own people the Jews.

But this woman would not be ignored. She was persistent, like that other woman who had dared to touch the hem of Jesus' garment, or like that blind Bartimaeus who would not shut up, but kept yelling, "Lord Jesus, have mercy on us, son of David!" (Matthew 20:30, Luke 18:35-43) In fact, this Canaanite mother uses that same language: "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David." "Lord, help me." She calls him Lord three times. Even her body language is worshipful: she kneels down before him. And when Jesus throws her that line, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs," the woman makes a statement of great wit and even greater faith: "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." She has faith that the crumbs from the master's table will be enough. Now for months Jesus has been trying to teach his disciples that God's kingdom is like an abundant heavenly banquet, but they are slow to get it. Yet here this foreign woman already gets it! This Gentile understands the kingdom better and has more faith than Jesus' handpicked students. Doesn't that qualify her as a daughter of Israel?

“Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.”

The persistence of that woman, the wit of that woman, the worship of that woman, the faith of that woman, *moved* Jesus to change his mind and grant her plea. It changed Jesus’ mind in another way, too. He adjusted his timetable for reaching out to the Gentiles, and started doing so from then on. It was the beginning of the spread of the gospel to the Gentiles. The gospel was going to the dogs.

Dare we speak of Jesus in terms of changing and learning and growing? The Bible does. Remember the words of Luke about Jesus growing up: “And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man.” (Luke 2:52) Jesus was fully human and fully divine all of his life. It is human to grow. In fact, healthy humans never stop growing and maturing. Jesus was fully human. Throughout his life, Jesus did what healthy humans do, he kept on growing. Yet as Jesus grew, we see him dealing with every situation in a godly way. Jesus is fully divine.

Jesus came away different from that encounter with that faithful Gentile woman. He took something with him from that day on. He would always remember her. Now think of the implications for you and God. There is something that only you can bring to God that is unique. You can move God in a way that only you can. Your prayers to God make a difference. The universe is different for God because you exist; you are that precious to God. (Or, as one church sign put it, “If God had a refrigerator, your picture would be on it.”)

Now if Jesus was changed by that encounter with her, think how much she was changed by her encounter with him! What do we know of this woman’s life before she met Jesus? She is from the “district of Tyre and Sidon.” Tyre and Sidon was to Galilee as the Triangle is to eastern North Carolina; it was far more wealthy. She came from a wealthy region of traders, maybe she herself was an affluent merchant. We know something else about this woman from the Markan version of this event, which says she “was a Gentile...” (Mark 7:26) That means she was a woman of the dominant Greek culture, fluent in the worldwide language of trade, familiar with Greek customs. In other words, she was well connected. Wealthy, and well connected.

Now see this wealthy, well connected woman pleading with this poor backwoods carpenter holy man. What a comedown to have to chase after him. How embarrassing to have to kneel before him and call him “lord.” This for her was very different behavior. What a big change in her life for this affluent well-connected woman to admit that she was desperate for the help of this peasant holy man.

But she was desperate for the sake of her daughter. She would give up anything, any power, any privilege, any pride to receive any help this lower class peasant might give. So she humbled herself like a dog begging for scraps. And maybe that’s exactly what she needed to do. Just like the woman at the well needed the living water, just like

prideful Nicodemus needed to be born again, just as the rich young ruler needed to sell all he had, so this well-heeled woman needed to kneel in the dust and acknowledge her need.

And so, in the process of begging for her daughter, she became a changed woman. Just as Jesus was affected by his encounter with her, so she was changed by her encounter with him.

In the past few weeks, I have baptized two young adults. It is not an easy thing for an adult to be baptized. It feels awkward. It feels a little silly. It definitely feels very vulnerable. When you come down into the water in your bare feet while hundreds of people are watching you, status and pride are the last things that come to mind. Yet Liza and Jason were eager to do it, almost desperate to do it, because for them it was part of what they needed more than anything else, the forgiveness of Christ for everything in their past, the leadership of Christ for everything in their future. They eagerly humbled themselves to receive that blessing.

I think coming to Christ is more difficult for successful, well-off Americans than for anybody else on earth. We are well connected, we can basically have anything that we want. So how embarrassing it is to admit that we desperately need something our status and wealth can never get for us. To admit our need for forgiveness and for Jesus in our lives is a real comedown in status. For an American to seek Jesus is just as humbling as this woman on her knees in the dust crying, "Have mercy on me, Lord, son of David..."

Sometimes it takes a crisis like hers to bring us to our knees. Then we let go of every bit of pretense and pride and depend on nothing else but God's unmerited grace: the forgiveness we don't deserve, the guidance we could never give ourselves. In other words, when we get over ourselves, then we can get on with a new life. This is the gospel for the well-off and the well-connected: When that well-off woman met Jesus, she was changed.

But there is more. Even the bystanders were changed, namely, the disciples. You remember their part in this episode: they tried to shoo away this woman. It seems like they did this a lot: shooing away children before they bother Jesus, walking up to the Samaritan well and wondering what in the world Jesus is doing talking to that woman, walking through Jericho and trying to make blind Bartimaeus shut up. The disciples saw themselves as the bouncers of Jesus' entourage. They tried to control the perimeter.

You and I and the rest of the church have tried to inherit that job...bouncers for Jesus. We believe it is up to us to protect Jesus from the trash, the hopeless, the ignorant, from the dogs of the world. It's all part of the old idea that some people are just too far gone and not worth the trouble.

There is a play by John Drinkwater about Abraham Lincoln. In one scene Lincoln talks with a woman who is passionate for the northern cause. She asks how the war is going.

Lincoln says, "There is news of victory. They lost 2700 men, and we lost 800."

The woman was ecstatic. "How splendid," she said.

Her reaction disturbed the President: "Thirty-five hundred human lives lost..."

But the woman interrupted, "Oh, you must not talk like that, Mr. President. There were only 800 that mattered."

Lincoln's shoulders drooped and tears were evident in his eyes: "Madam, the world is larger than your heart." *(From a sermon by Dan L. Flanagan, St. Paul's UMC, Papillion, NE, printed in Lectionary Homiletics, August-September 2005, pp. 26-27)*

The world is larger than our hearts. The disciples told Jesus, "Send her away, she keeps shouting after us." We tell Jesus, "Send the world away, they keep shouting after us."

The disciples must have been humbled to see such great faith in this woman foreigner. Eventually, they became the church that included every kind of person in every corner of the earth. Eventually, the early church became the one place in their time that included every kind of person: slave or free, male or female, Jew or Gentile, all in one family of faith.

CONCLUSION

When Jesus met the Canaanite woman, he was changed, and she was changed, and the disciples were changed:

- Jesus, so human and so divine, lowered himself to meet the crying need of this desperate woman.
- The woman, so well-connected and so wealthy, lowered herself to receive the healing grace of God for her daughter.
- The disciples, so protective of Jesus and of their status around them, lowered themselves to watch a miracle of faith and healing for an outsider.

Who here is ready to be changed? Who here is ready to humble yourself to witness a miracle of faith and healing for an outsider? Or who here is desperately in need of the grace of Christ for yourself? Are you willing to lower yourself to your knees and say, "Lord Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me"? Let it be done for you as you wish.

-- Douglas E. Murray