



Mount Carmel Lutheran Church

A Sermon About Dogs

Sermon by Pr. John Strommen

on Matthew 15:10-28 (Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32)

on Sunday, August 16, 2020 (11th Sunday of Pentecost)

“It’s not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” The pivotal quote from our lesson today. Funny thing is, as children, many of us probably snuck food from the table and give it to our dog! How many of you have had a dog or currently have a dog that likes to hang around the table hoping to pick up scraps of food from you?

I grew up with a black lab and boy, when you’re having dinner, are those dogs ever good at standing just in your line of vision and looking pathetic and starved. But Pal, my dog, didn’t necessarily wait for scraps to be tossed to her. She was big and bold enough that if you weren’t careful, you might reach down to grab your hamburger and it’s not there anymore! If you left two sticks of butter on the counter unattended, you’d wonder what happened to the butter until you saw the wax paper on the floor all torn up.

Well, our pets have to eat, too. And they can be quite persistent in getting what they want.

Who would have guessed that dogs waiting by the dinner table could tell us about the kingdom of God?

One day a Canaanite woman approached Jesus because her daughter was sick. She had no doubt heard what Jesus could do. The only problem was, she was a member of an ethnic group from the other side of the tracks, bitter rivals of the Jews. Furthermore, she violated social protocol. Normally, only a male representative of a household would approach a stranger for a request like this. This woman was bold! Then again, her daughter was sick. What parent wouldn’t be bold to care for her child?

And as she approaches Jesus, she shouts out, “Have mercy on me, son of David, my daughter is being tormented by a demon.” This plea is only met with silence. But she

persists, continuing to call out to Jesus. Eventually, the disciples say to Jesus, "Tell her to go away, she keeps shouting at us."

This sounds a lot like what prophets do in the Old Testament: they're often shouting a message on behalf of God that the privileged and powerful don't want to hear. "You are not being faithful to God!" they would say. "You're neglecting the poor! You must repent and change." Prophets shout and keep shouting because it's the only way they'll be heard. By persistence. Hmm. Is this woman's shouting somehow representing God?

Jesus finally responds to the disciples: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." In other words, she is not our concern.

Does this sound like Jesus to you? Jesus must have really been fried. The disciples, too. But, that's probably why they're in the Canaanite district of Tyre and Sidon - to get away to a place where no one will recognize them. So much for that! Remember, Jesus is grief stricken over his cousin John's execution and he's had a very busy public ministry of late.

So, on their get-a-way-from-it-all trip, Jesus is acting like an off-duty rabbi. "Don't bother me. I'm off the clock now. Plus, I only help certain people." And the disciples are acting like bouncers. "Shall we get rid of this woman, Jesus? We don't need her around."

But the woman refused to take indifference as an answer. She persisted, finally kneeling in front of Jesus, pleading, "please help me."

To which Jesus offers this infamous reply: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." The "children" who sit at the table in Jesus' metaphor are clearly Jews, and the dogs are the Canaanites. It was an insult, plain and simple. You don't deserve what we have.

Now, if Jesus didn't seem quite like Jesus to this point, he *really* doesn't seem like Jesus now. What is going on here? Well, what Jesus said here is exactly what any Jewish man would say in this time. Jesus was expressing a centuries long bias and prejudice about how Jews regard Canaanites, particularly pushy Canaanite women. Jesus here expressed "internalized prejudice," so deep and assumed that one doesn't recognize it's offensiveness. As if it's invisible.

This passage reminds me of the current discussion in America about systemic racism. So deep, you don't see it, but you are a part of it. At our book club meeting in the triangle this week, the fourteen of us who gathered were all coming to grips with our own internalized prejudice. We were reviewing the history of racism toward blacks in our nation – actually, native Americans, too – and how little we knew about this growing up as whites. Basically, because it's not in the history books we give to our children. There was a collective sense of the veil being lifted to see unsightly truths about ourselves. Truths hidden so deep we didn't even know they were there, our own version where some people are "children," and others are "dogs."

There is a brief scene in John Drinkwater's play, "Abraham Lincoln," that illustrates this tribal demeaning of other people's value. Lincoln is having a conversation with a woman who is passionate about the northern cause. She asks him about the progress of the war:

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

"How splendid," replied the woman.

Disturbed by her response, Lincoln says, "3500 human lives were lost..."

"Oh, but you must not talk like that, Mr. President. There were only 800 dead *who mattered.*"

Lincoln's shoulders drooped and tears were evident in his eyes. "Madam, the world is larger than your heart."

It's true. Often people's hearts extend only as far as their own tribe or people. This is what God discovered firsthand when God became human. And the Jesus we encounter today is a very human, indeed - capable of uttering ethno-centric, tribal sentiments.

Rather than being angry or defensive, the woman runs with the dogs-at-the-dinner-table image. "Yes, Lord," she respectfully opines, "yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

So, she conditionally accepts the demeaning metaphor to make a point. *If you must consider me a dog, she reasons, even a dog gets to share in the bounty of the feast.*

It is at this point that we realize we are being invited to take the perspective of the disenfranchised woman, the universal "other," who is routinely kicked to the curb. And this "other" seems to know something. She seems to know the abundance of God

that we saw in the feeding of 5,000, in the healing of blind Bartimaeus and Jairus' daughter; that there is enough bread and bounty to go around - even for her and her daughter. She gets it. God's faithfulness to Israel is for everyone. The Gospel message, the radical inclusiveness of God, is being preached by this Syro-Phoenician woman!

She's not supposed to be the messenger of this stuff, but she is. She reminds Jesus he is not an off-duty rabbi, and the disciples that they are not bouncers. They are bearers of the message that everyone has a place at God's table of abundance and blessing! She is dismantling the system that considers Canaanites dogs by claiming what the son of David *is really about*. She persisted!

What a story! Jesus is the voice of a broken world, and the Canaanite woman is the voice of God!

Jesus now does a 180, recognizes the truth of her persistence, declares her faith "great," and instantly heals her daughter. So, shortly after Jesus chastised Peter a bit by saying to him, "Oh ye of little faith," we find a Gentile woman who has great faith; a woman who had to remind Jesus who he was.

Sometimes it takes someone from the other side of the tracks to walk up to us and remind us who we are and what we're about.

Jimmy had a friend who lived on the wrong side of the tracks. Jimmy's uncle was a famous country singer in the early 1950's. Uncle Lonzo Green was coming from Arkansas to visit Jimmy and his family in Tennessee. Jimmy was really excited about this, so he told everyone at school. One of Jimmy's friends was especially interested because he loved music, he wanted to learn how to play the guitar, and he liked Lonzo Green's music. He asked Jimmy if he might meet his uncle.

When Lonzo Green arrived, Jimmy immediately asked his uncle if he would meet with his friend, and Green agreed. Right then, Jimmy remembered that his parents forbade his friend from ever coming into the house. His parents, you see, referred to his friend as "white trash." He lived on the wrong side of the tracks. When Lonzo Green heard the story, he agreed to meet Jimmy's friend outside the house.

A couple of hours later Lonzo moved to front step to wait for Jimmy's friend. Shortly, a dark haired, quiet boy moved toward him. The boy was obviously self-conscious about the surroundings.

Green noticed the boy's guitar, obviously inexpensive and tethered by a piece of string. The young boy smiled and sat beside Green. Lonzo took the instrument from the boy and asked if anybody had taught him to tune his guitar? In his soft, polite Southern drawl, came the answer, "No, sir."

Lonzo spent a few minutes showing the boy which frets to use to tune the guitar, and then he began to play a song, then another, and another. The boy's eyes were dancing as he listened with joy.

The evening came and the boy left, never being invited inside. Lonzo Green would never meet him again. But he left his company with a warm memory, and a renewed enthusiasm for music, and the guitar.

Elvis Presley began on the wrong side of the tracks, but his life changed, and his impact on our culture was tremendous.

And maybe, just maybe, Lonzo's guitar lessons on the front steps helped him to see that his world was much bigger than just "the other side of the tracks."

Music has a way of ignoring boundaries. So does God's kingdom. When we forget that truth, sometimes it takes a persistent, even shrill voice to remind us of that. As we make our way in this world, Lord, help us to listen to the people who remind us how big your kingdom really is. Amen.