

**"Going to the Dogs" Isaiah 56:1,6-8 & Matthew 15:21-28**

In England today, if you say someone is "going to the dogs," you are most likely referring to a retiree who goes to the Greyhound races. This is the modern meaning. But before the advent of such races, "going to the dogs" meant to "become ruined." It hearkened back to the Biblical character of Jezebel, who after leading the culture down the wrong road, was literally, fed to the dogs. Some of that older concept of becoming ruined is hinted at in today's Gospel reading.

Quite surprisingly, Jesus, who is usually the one turning away harshness and accusation with a gentle and just response, is the one who is harsh, rude even, to the woman asking for healing for her daughter. What is going on here? Why is Jesus suggesting healing her daughter would be "giving the children's bread to the dogs?" The first thing we have to remember is that Matthew's Gospel is written for the Jewish community. The early followers of Jesus were all Jewish. "The Way" as the Jesus movement was called was a Jewish movement. Matthew, and the earlier Gospel of Mark, have this story in it because it addresses the longest running theological debate in Jewish history. How do Jews- God's chosen people, deal with Gentiles? This debate is obvious If we read the Hebrew scriptures. we see both the call to have nothing to do with Gentiles - laws against taking foreign wives, for example and arguments like the Prophet Isaiah's that faithful Gentiles must be included. The Book of Ruth which tells the virtues of a foreign woman, who is included in Jesus' genealogy in Matthew, argues with the demands to completely destroy Gentile towns and peoples in other parts of scripture. The Gospels of Luke and John do not have this story, because those Gospels, written for Gentile readers, and in John's case, written when Gentiles were becoming the majority, don't need to address the question.

So on a quiet day in Tyre and Sidon, Jesus is thrust right into the middle of the debate. Jesus may be unsure what to do. He only has so much energy. He is single minded in his mission, he has to be, but why is he so mean? We do not really know. Perhaps, Jesus having

to deal with a woman, to whom in that culture, he shouldn't even be talking, and not only a woman, but a Gentile, is confused. Jesus is in a very culturally dangerous situation. Earlier in the Gospel a Roman soldier asks Jesus to heal his son, and Jesus does so. Is it because he is a man, or a Roman soldier that Jesus does not to make angry? But before he heals the boy Jesus lauds the Roman's faith and says, "many will come from far and enter the Kingdom and eat with Abraham, Issac and Jacob, but some who are heirs of the Kingdom will be cast out." Jesus uses the soldier's faith to warn his enemies, the unfaithful Jewish leaders, that they are not guaranteed a spot in the Kingdom of God. But Jesus does not do this with this woman. Oh, he recognizes her faith, but he cannot use her to further his message. There is nothing to be gained by helping with her. She is a no-body. Unlike the healing the Roman soldier's son, where the Jewish Religious leaders would not publicly criticize Jesus, lest they stir up the wrath of the Romans, Jesus critics could easily use this Gentile woman's request and his response as scandal; perfect fodder for accusing Jesus of making a mockery of the Law, which would mean the whole religious and cultural structure would start "going to the dogs."

Jesus may be feeling trapped, in a no-win situation. This is a trial for Jesus. It is a moment where he must wrestle between keeping focus on his mission, following the religious and cultural rules, and providing healing to someone in need. Is Jesus trying to chase the woman away with the harsh statement, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs?" maybe Jesus doesn't want to deal with all the conflicting thoughts and just wants the problem (meaning the woman) to go away and he turns mean. Some theologians suggest Jesus is merely testing her faith - Challenging her to see if she is indeed a worthy Gentile? Could be, but why would he be so mean, if that were his concern?

Whatever Jesus' reason for his statement, the woman's response, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table," stops him cold, and makes him unable to avoid the issue any longer. He immediately heals the woman's daughter. In all the other Gospel stories it is Jesus who has the final word of an argument, but not in this one. A

Gentile, woman has the final word of truth, and no matter how much he had resisted, Jesus recognizes and responds to that truth.

This week in our study of Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth, Campbell talked about the spiritual hero dealing with trials like this one. For Campbell the trials are a part of what transforms a person into a hero. Jesus is transformed throughout his life by his encounters and conflicts with others. Some encounters seem to awaken him the awareness that the cultural norms do not necessarily reflect God's thoughts. When the parents bring children to Jesus, the disciples are aghast, "the master should not be bothered by this, these are just children" And given the mortality rates of the time, the value of children was pretty minimal. And yet, Jesus says, "Let the children come to me... for these are the ones who are in God's Realm."

We can have a hard time thinking of Jesus changing or growing in his earthly life. Part of the reason is we humans can easily get confused by the telescoping of history. This week on Jeopardy, a young man was asked to name the person who received a law degree *in absentia* (not *posthumously*) from a South African University in the late 1980's. His answer was Mahatma Gandhi, who most of us know died long before then. in 1948. The actual answer was Nelson Mandela. But for this young man, these men were both historical... and so he got confused 1948 and 1988 look the same when you are born in 2001. This is very common, and likewise when we look at the story of Jesus, a story we have heard early in our lives. A story from Christmas, to the Cross, to Easter, we see Jesus as the final victorious one. But our Gospel reading reminds us that Jesus changes over the course of his ministry. Though we are tempted to think so, the human Jesus is not completely the Christ when he starts his work. The outcome of his life is not fully known and certainly not what many expect. Jesus had the opportunity to choose different paths many times in his life starting with temptation story at the front of the Gospel. We read the familiar words of the temptation story thinking Jesus had no trouble with those temptations but the scripture says he needed Angels to minister to him

after. Because we know how the story ends, we don't give Jesus enough credit for overcoming the temptations. We must remember the Gospel story is not a static one, but one that tells us of the continual transformation of a faithful hero named Jesus who in the course of his life and death becomes the resurrected Christ.

Jesus had many choices with this woman. He could have left her without answering, Jesus could have ended with the harsh statement. But Jesus was moved and changed by this Gentle woman. He is transformed, so much so that he violates multiple cultural norms. He even violates his own understanding of his mission, and does as she requests. Jesus is changed. And like for all of us, he is changed - not when he encounters those who are like him - but when he meets with those who are very unlike him - the "other," the "stranger."

Many in today's world think we are "going to the dogs." Yesterday's events in Charlottesville, VA. where one of Pastor Judy's close friends is a city council member ended in violence. And ironically, both sides blame the other for causing the erosion of our nation. Unlike with Jesus and the Canaanite woman, there was no real encounter, no discussion or debate. Part of the reason for our current conflict is how easy it is to insulate ourselves from people who are different from us. Social Media, News from particular perspectives, segregated Sunday morning worship, it all makes it easy to stay in a silo of our own comfortable beliefs and actions. We can remain comfortable in this culture, but is that the way we as followers of Jesus are called to live? Oh, it is not easy. To live in a rapidly changing world is difficult. We are, like Jesus, often forced to confront the Canaanite Women = those who have different beliefs, religions, clothing, language. And like Jesus, we have many options. We can ignore them; we can insult them; we can dismiss them outright as evil, or less than human. Or the final choice, we can listen to them. But there is a risk if we do this - We may be moved out of our comfort zone. We don't have to agree with each other, but until we expand our comfort zone a little bit, we will be stuck in a culture of conflict, because we will never be able to truly have dialogue.

Perhaps our world is “going to the dogs,” not because of change, or the strangers who are coming into our lives, but because we are unwilling to be challenged or changed by those who think differently than we do. Jesus was transformed by his encounter with the Canaanite woman. He could not go on with all his previous assumptions and beliefs. And if Jesus was willing to change, Maybe we are called to be willing to examine our cultural norms and beliefs.

### **Isaiah 56:1, 6-8**

Thus says the LORD: Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed. And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, all who keep the Sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant-- these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. Thus says the Lord GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, "I will gather others to them besides those already gathered."

### **Matthew 15:21-28**

Jesus left that place 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.