

Matthew 15:21-28

My dear Friends in Christ, I think I know something we can all agree on – dogs are better than cats. Okay, maybe we don't agree – but stay with me for a moment – and recall that dogs will give you unconditional love until the day they die, while cats will make you pay for every mistake you've ever made since the day you were born. And a dog will bring you your slippers while a cat will bring you a dead mouse in your slippers. Well, maybe I still haven't convinced all of you, but both cat lovers and dog lovers will, sadly, have to agree that calling someone a dog has never been a flattering term. I'm sorry dog lovers, but as much as we love our dogs, historically and even today, it's not polite term.

And this is relevant because it is the term used in our Gospel reading today in Matthew as Jesus interacts with a Canaanite woman. We may wonder what's going on here – it's a tough story. The context is that Jesus is trying, once again, to get away from the crowds- he is leaving with his disciples, but they are being pursued by this woman who persists and won't stop shouting at them. Everyone is annoyed with her – and the disciples are so irritated that they begin urging Jesus to send her away. But he doesn't. And why is this woman pestering them? Why is she shouting at them and won't stop? And please notice that she is a Canaanite woman, so she had no social standing and in that society she should not have even dared address these men. How could she have such audacity?

Well, she has a sick little girl- her daughter, she says, is tormented. And I can tell you one thing – a mother who is desperately worried about her suffering child is not going to let a little thing like social standards and traditions stand in her way.

I know this because when my son Graysen was an infant, he had severe breathing problems that landed him in the ER and required lifesaving breathing treatments that only a medical emergency team could supply him. On three

occasions we had found ourselves in the ER of the Portland Children's Hospital and each time we had been immediately triaged for emergency treatment. But on the fourth occasion, the hospital was particularly busy and the nurses and staff were all distracted with other patients – and so this time we didn't get swift assistance when we arrived. As I held him in my arms and looked at him struggling, I put away every ounce of polite speech I knew and I shouted- demanded that someone take a look at him right now and get him help. It worked – my yelling and insisting worked...and they did help him immediately. So, a distressed parent is capable of being incredibly insistent and demanding when we need to be – and this Canaanite woman recognized Jesus as the one who could heal her daughter.

And since ignoring her doesn't work, Jesus essentially tells her that solving this problem is not on his job description –he says: "I was sent only the lost sheep of Israel." But she counters and gets in front him and falls to her knees and says, "Lord, help me." And then Jesus does something we can't stand – he says the unthinkable, he says, "It's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Jesus recites from his cultural and religious tradition, he uses the derogatory language of the day that was used to describe her people – her despised race. Why? Why would he do that?

The last time I preached on this text was August of 2017 – it was days after the Charlottesville car attack when a white supremacist took his car and drove it into a crowd of the protestors, mowing them down, sending 28 people into the hospital and killing one young woman. Racism is as ancient as the human race and this story from our ancient Scripture texts reminds us of this fact. Here we see Jesus giving voice to a racist term – so why would he do that?

We have to dig a little deeper- the first clue that he is up to something unusual here is the fact that he is completely doing away with tradition by even speaking with the woman at all. But secondly, notice that he offers her the opportunity to challenge him and ultimately outwit him in this

exchange of words. Because this woman responds, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." And her point is brilliant – because as we dog lovers know, we may feed ourselves first, but we would never neglect to feed our beloved dogs...it's why we have doggie bags. And this woman knew that somehow in Jesus, God was present and there was hope – there was hope for her and her daughter because even the crumbs from God's table can bring healing and grace. Her retort is the winning phrase in this short debate...because she speaks truth.

What usually happens when someone makes a really good point in a debate? Does the other party stop and say, "Wow – you got me – I'm wrong – you're right." I mean, that's what happens all the time on Facebook right? No. People usually simply dig in their heels more deeply. And here is where Jesus is so different: and where we can honestly take a cue from him ....because Jesus absolutely allows this woman to one-up him in front of everyone.

I like to imagine he voiced what was on everyone's mind in order to challenge it – but I don't know exactly. I just know that his response to her is beautiful: he says to her, "Woman, great is your faith!" Notice he's never said that about any of his disciples. In fact, just last week we heard Jesus calling his disciples, "Oh ye of little faith" out on the ocean. And Jesus has accused the religious leaders of lacking faith. The only 2 people Jesus ever praises for their great faith are outsiders- people from a different, despised race...and in this case, a woman no less. And then he says, "Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter is healed instantly.

Jesus rewards this woman's faith, insight, persistence and humility and ultimately shines a spotlight on her as someone who is not only worthy of conversation with him but of extravagant praise and of God's blessing in the form of a miracle. In doing this, Jesus is challenging both the racism and sexism that is so rampant in his tradition and culture. Jesus gives voice to the

tradition but then undermines it completely and upholds this Canaanite woman, someone totally outside their religious tradition, as the hero, as the example to all of a person of faith, worthy of God's greatest blessings. Jesus shows us that it doesn't matter who you are – God loves and blesses men and women of every background and race and religious group as children of God. That's hope for you and me-whoever we are.

Throughout the centuries Jesus speaks and reminds us of an alternative to the hatred and injustice that are part of our traditions that we live with every day. And he reminds us that it's not just a problem for "those people out there." It's a problem that each one of us has to contend with. It's not enough to yell, "that's racist" every time someone says something ignorant or bigoted, which, by the way, we all do at times, because we have to contend with the injustices of our own lives...in our own communities and even in the church itself.

The Episcopal priest, the Rev. Scott Gunn asked back in 2017, "How has my church stood with--or failed to stand with--those who are the victims of racism, hatred, and fear? Has my church benefitted from white supremacy, and, if so, what must we do to repent?" That question is more relevant now than ever.

Fortunately it's never too late to say, "I was wrong. You're right" and begin to take the down the walls and barriers that separate us from one another and from God. And when we do, we find healing not only for others, but for ourselves. And as the Canaanite woman knew, there is more than enough of God's grace to go around – there is plenty of food at God's table for everyone...for both dog lovers and cat lovers.

AMEN.