

A Dog's Life

A Sermon for Worship on the Third Sunday of Lent
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

March 19, 2017

Text: Matthew 15:21-28

What is it about pets that draws us to them, do you think? For me, I think it's that dogs – the only pets I have ever had – love us unconditionally. My dog loves me no matter what I look like or what my mood is. My dog loves me when I take her for a long walk and when we just circle the back yard. She loves me when I forget to buy her favorite dog biscuits and when I give her hunks of raw hamburger. Of course, our family members love us but it's not the same. We get irritated with each other. We grump and grouch at each other after a long day or when something doesn't match expectations. Not once has my dog ever been grumpy with me. She just loves me, trusting that whatever I am doing, I am doing it because I love her. I once saw someone wearing a t-shirt that said, "I hope to become the person my dog thinks I am." The world would be a much better place if we all that as our goal.

That's not to say that all is constant wonderfulness with a dog in the house. It's not. You would not believe how much shedding one dog is capable of if you've never experienced it. And cleaning up the mess when no one got home early enough to let the dog out "in time" is not pleasant. The best two out of three falls it often takes to get my dog to the vet will never be on my list

of things I love to do. But then she looks at me with those big brown eyes holding more love than you would think possible and all that irritation slips away. Is any of this sounding familiar to you? If you have a dog, I'm thinking it does. I'm guessing the same is true of cats, although I am not sure because I've never had one. I have known folks who are devoted guinea pig owners, bunny owners and even hamster owners who love their pets with the same passion as mine for Wiley. That's because love isn't love until you give it away, something our pets know and practice automatically.

So, if this is true, why is it so shocking to hear Jesus speak to the Canaanite woman as he does in today's text from Matthew when he compares her to a dog? She comes to him desperate for help with her daughter possessed by a demon, a common way of describing illness at that time. How many other people approach him asking for the same – healing – and he responds with kindness and compassion, sending the newly healed person on their way. But this time his response is anything but kind. “It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.” Say what?? Did Jesus, *our Jesus*, just call a woman asking him for help a dog??? Yes, he did. But that was not the end of the story.

What the heck is going on here? Who is *this* Jesus and why is he acting this way? To find the answers we seek, we need to understand some of the context, the back story of this text. First,

we need to realize where Jesus and the disciples were geographically. That sounds odd I know but in this case it does matter. The text is clear in describing Jesus and the disciples as traveling to the “district of Tyre and Sidon,” a Jewish enclave. But to get there, they would have to go through Gentile territory. Let’s remember what a Gentile is – any non-Jew. Jesus and the disciples were intentionally going through a Gentile region. Why? Scholars suggest it was because Jesus was exhausted from all he had been doing, especially all his testy encounters with the Pharisees and Sadducees. He knew they would not follow him into a Gentile area and he needed to get away from them so he could just have a break from all the arguing. That makes sense.

Now we need to turn our attention to the woman. Matthew describes her as Canaanite and Mark, who tells the same story, describes her as Syrophoenician. Who’s right? They both are. Mark is using the current geo-political name for the woman’s identity – Syrophoenician. Matthew is using the historical name – Canaanite. The Phoenicians were the descendants of the Canaanites. Who were the Canaanites? The ancient enemies of the Jewish people. The Canaanites were the ones who originally possessed the land God gave to Moses and the chosen people, the ancient Israelites. The Canaanites were the ones Israel had to battle to become Israel. The Canaanites were the enemy, and an ancient one at that. And here comes this Canaanite woman asking

Jesus to heal her daughter. He says no, almost without thinking. Sort of a reflex reaction, I think.

He tries to explain his decision, to her and the disciples. Let's not forget that the disciples asked him to do what the woman asked not because they thought he should help her but because they just wanted to shut her up. She was annoying the heck out of them, following along behind them pleading for help. "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." Over and over again. Jesus did not answer her at all. He just kept walking. And she kept pleading. Finally the disciples said, "send her away for she keeps shouting at us." And he replies to them but she must have heard it too, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." I'm not here to help people like her, Jesus says. I'm here only to help the chosen people of God, the people who are Jews like you and me.

Well, this woman was not going to take no for an answer, even from this miraculous healer everyone was talking about. She was not going to give up on what was surely her last hope to save her daughter. If she, a Gentile descendant of this faith healer's historical enemy, was coming to him for help, it had to mean she had already been everywhere else she could think of. She had to have prayed to her own gods, and sought the help of the healers in her own culture. Nothing had worked. She had been hearing

about this Jewish healer and she knew he was her last hope. He just said no, because of who she was. She was having none of it.

Again, she asked for his help, this time while kneeling at his feet. Once again, he answered in an even more heartless way. “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs,” he says to her. Ouch. That must have felt like a slap across the face. He just called her and her sick daughter dogs. I can only imagine what I would have said in that circumstance. Think about yourself. If you went to someone for help for your child and they said, no – that helping you would be like giving food to dogs – how would you react? What would you have said? What would you have done? Not what this woman did, I’m guessing. Without hesitating after his unkind comment, she said calmly, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master’s table.” I know I am not of your faith, she says to him. I know that makes me and my daughter not your concern. But surely there is enough love and compassion for you to share a little with me. Surely there is enough healing available to you that you can give just a little of it to my daughter because a little is all I need.

I imagine Jesus stopped for a moment to look at this woman who had spoken back to him. The disciples must have gasped and were now holding their breath because no one, NO ONE, had ever spoken back to Jesus like this. What would he do??? He looks at her and then speaks, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done

for you as you wish.” At that moment the text says, her daughter was healed. What’s interesting here is that Jesus didn’t say to the woman, “Great is your faith, your daughter is healed.” He said, “Great is your faith, let it be done for you as you wish.” He didn’t actually heal her daughter directly. Instead, he gave the woman what she asked for, that her daughter be healed. This is a small point, but a significant one. He acknowledged the woman’s faith in him as “Lord,” but he didn’t take the extra step of healing a Canaanite explicitly. Instead he assured her that her faith would provide what she asked. Her faith was enough.

We are still left with this question, though. Why did Jesus act this way? Why was he so mean to a woman asking for help? Scholars have turned hand springs trying to answer this question for decades. Some argue that he was just so tired that he didn’t realize what he was saying until the woman forced him to stop and see her. Others think Jesus planned all this so he could awaken and enliven the woman’s faith in her, using her as an example of just what faith could make happen. Still others just see a cultural clash that was eventually solved to everyone’s satisfaction so what’s the big deal anyway. The problem for me with all these explanations is that they reduce the woman to being a prop, an insignificant player in a drama whose sole purpose was to make Jesus appear more manly. She was just a woman seeking

help for a daughter in this view of the story. But I think she was so much more than that.

Two things are key about this story. First, this woman persisted. She refused to be dissuaded from what she knew she needed – healing for her daughter – no matter what anyone said or did, including Jesus. She knew Jesus could help her and she would not settle for anything less. She persisted in her faith, in her actions, and in naming what she needed. She persisted in her faith and trust in Jesus, even when his response would have turned off a less strong person. She persisted, and in her persistence, she did what no one else had ever done – she got Jesus to change his mind. He changed his mind about who she was and what she was asking him for. She got him to see her as a person who knew he could do something and would not let him get away with anything else. She persisted. Jesus relented. A little girl was healed. And both Jesus and the woman were changed forever by the encounter. The woman discovered a strength she never knew she had and this along with her suddenly deepened faith in Jesus changed her forever. Jesus, for the first time, had someone confront him about who he was and who he had come to help. Was he really just there for the people of Israel or did God have even bigger plans for what he had been born to do? Up until this day, Jesus concentrated only on helping the Jews to reimagine their relationship with their God. But now, this

woman had made visible for him that God's message of unconditional love and all it made possible was much bigger than he realized.

As I read and think about this story, I wonder about what happened to the woman and her daughter after this encounter. The daughter was healed, we know that. But then what? How did this faith she had uncovered in herself change her life? We know what happened to Jesus after this. But what happened to her? I like to think she kept tabs on Jesus as best she could. Maybe she even came when she could to hear him speak. Maybe she found an excuse to be in Jerusalem around the time of the Passover and she saw him ride in on that donkey and she was as excited as everyone else that something incredible was unfolding right in front of her. Maybe she found herself in the crowd before Pilate, horrified as the chants "crucify him" grew louder and louder. Maybe she even witnessed the crucifixion from a distance, too scared to come close. And then maybe, just maybe, as they made their way back home, she and her daughter shuffling along the dusty roads, tears stinging their eyes, got word of the resurrection and they smiled. They laughed and shrieked with joy, dancing in the roadway so gleefully that even the little dogs joined in. A dog's life, indeed, she thought. Thanks be to God. Amen.