

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, Sunday, August 16, 2020, Year A

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

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Scripture: Matthew 15:21-28

“The Faith of a Dog?”

You know the old saying – “sticks and stones can break my bones – but names will never hurt me.” I am sorry – but no one enjoys being called names. On the surface – it would seem that what appears to be an insult is something much more. We will examine this further.

In today's Gospel, Matthew shows us a Jesus that, at first glance, does not appear to be the Jesus we are familiar with. The Jesus I know is a caring and compassionate, teacher and healer, the Son of God who came to earth to die for all of our sins. The Gospels speak of a tender and loving Savior who gave all He had for each one of us. But in this Gospel reading we seem to be seeing an entirely different Jesus. He appears to be harsh, callous, uncaring to a grieving mother who comes to Him seeking help. At first, Jesus ignores her, and then, Jesus tells His disciples that His ministry is ONLY for the lost sheep of Israel. I am surprised by what appears to be an insult when Jesus calls her a dog!

Oh my goodness, what a reaction to this Gentile woman. This most certainly is not how I would expect God to respond to this woman, to any woman, let alone anyone in crisis – and that insulting name. I think there is more here than meets the ears! Looking closer at this Gospel account, I realized several things:

- This was NOT the first time that Jesus has been approached by Gentiles for help. In Luke 6:17 we see Jesus right after He chose His 12 disciples - “*a great multitude of people out of all Judea and Jerusalem, and from the seacoast of Tyre and Sidon, came to hear him, and to be healed of their diseases.*” Jesus healed people from Tyre and Sidon – Gentiles - just like this woman - only a few months earlier.
- In Matthew chapter 8, Jesus healed the servant of a Roman centurion. Romans were Gentiles just like this woman – and they were hated enemies of the Jews, and yet Jesus did not object to healing THAT man's servant.

And so I want to suggest to you that Jesus went to the land of Tyre and Sidon for just THIS specific meeting with this specific woman - a Canaanite, a pagan, who was probably a worshipper of idols. Jesus had made it noticeably clear how He felt about pagan idol worshippers! He had said: “*Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles had occurred in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. Nevertheless I say to you, it shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the Day of Judgment, than for you.*” (Matthew 11:21-22) Tyre and Sidon were the epitome of wickedness. They were the “sin-cities” of their day. It was a land filled with immorality, corruption, idol worship, and self-indulgence.

As we know - Jews did not have much to do with Gentiles. A Gentile was anyone who was not born of Jewish parents. That would make us all Gentiles, and that was part of our prayer and Paul's prayer from Romans 11. If you were a Gentile - Jews would not talk to you; they would

not eat with you; in fact, they would have hated the very idea of even doing business with you.

First century Jews had a special bath called a mikvah, which contained natural water – either spring or ground water or rainwater for ritual cleansing – and more importantly, to wash off the ceremonial uncleanness of items that were purchased from Gentiles. The general attitude towards these non-Jews was that they were ignored, and possibly even hated. The Jews even had a term for the Gentiles- which translated in Greek - κύνων (koo´-ohn) means “a dog.” This is not the kind of friendly pet that most of us know. Jews did not give these sorts of dog’s names, because they were wild animals or scavengers who lived off garbage and dragged it through the streets. These were filthy, unclean animals. The disciples saw this woman as “a dog,” and viewed her as a worthless excuse for a human being. Even worse: she was from the land of Tyre and Sidon; she was one of the worst kinds of all Gentiles.

Coming to the house where Jesus is staying and crying out for help, the disciples do not want any part of her and they say: “*Send her away, for she is shouting out after us.*” (Matthew 15:23) They simply do not want her around. They think that she is not worthy of Jesus’ time. Now remember, we are talking about the chosen disciples of Jesus Christ; Jesus selected them to be the future leaders in the church that He had come to establish. These men were going to set the pattern for what the church was going to be. They would establish the mindset for generations of believers to come; and apparently, they were filled with hatred of people like this woman. They had some growing to do!

On the outside, these men look like they might be ready for the job of leadership. After all, they have been following Jesus for several years now; they have preached to crowds, they have healed the sick, they have cast out demons. They look like they are ready - but they are not ready!

It would seem that they are a little like an old building that is falling apart. There is something dangerous on the inside that makes them structurally in serious need of either demolition or an extreme makeover - to make them useful to Almighty God. It is the same with these people. Jesus knows exactly what is going through His disciples’ minds; Jesus knows how they view this Canaanite woman; and that is precisely why He came to the land of Tyre and Sidon. Jesus knows *all about* this woman, (just like He know about the woman at the well, and her seven husbands.) Jesus knows all about this woman - her sorrow and pain, as well as the pain of her daughter. She is exactly the kind of person that Jesus came to help and save. I want to suggest to you that Jesus loves this woman - but His disciples do not!

Jesus said that He had come “*to seek and to save that which was lost.*” (Luke 19:10) We know that Jesus spent time with people who no one else wanted to have around: tax collectors, prostitutes, and sinners. Romans 5:8 pretty well sums up why Jesus became man: “*God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.*” The Apostle Paul writes in his letter to Titus: “*For we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and*

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, Sunday, August 16, 2020, Year A

envy, hateful, hating one another. But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, He saved us, not on the basis what we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of rebirth and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, that being justified by His grace we might be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life." (Titus 3:3-7) Each one of us has a 'before.' Our Before is not something many of us are proud of. 'Before' Jesus came into our lives that is how we lived our lives - and Jesus could have left us that way; He could have totally ignored each one of us; He could have simply let us go our merry way – on the road to condemnation; BUT Jesus did not.

This woman stood outside that house crying out, "*Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is cruelly demon-possessed.*" (Matthew 15:22) And you know what? Jesus treated her just the way His disciples would expect a Jewish rabbi, of that day, to; to ignore her – a Gentile. This desperate woman, a mother pleaded for her daughter and knowing who Jesus is – she would not be ignored! She " *bowed down before Jesus*" and kept crying out "*Lord, help me!*" (Matthew 15:25) Her persistence made the Disciples uncomfortable, to say the least, and they just wanted her to go away. It was really getting to them and they said to Jesus: "*Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us.*" (Matthew 15:23)

Jesus' answer was, "*I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.*" (Matthew 15:24) There is something that Jesus wants all of us to learn from this. Jesus' response is an echo of the Disciple's inner feelings – He says: "*It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.*" (Matthew 15:26)

And so I return to my words at the beginning of this message. Jesus does not say this to her insult her; in fact, He did not even use the same kind of word that most Jews would have thrown at her - remember I just spoke about the Greek word κῦων (koo-ohn) – the Greek word for a mongrel or wild dog, but Jesus uses a slightly different word which when translated in Greek: κυνάριον (kunarion) - means a little dog, or a puppy – a beloved pet. Jesus did not say mongrel, but instead something that was precious, a puppy - a beloved pet! There is quite a difference here. Jesus does not let us down – He is the loving Savior. This word is used throughout their exchange!

In first century Israel, people would keep little dogs as pets just like we do. If you love pets you know that they are a part of the family – and when they pass on it is terrible, they are very special to us. I can just imagine the smile on this woman's face – because Jesus told her in a remarkably simple way that she was loved by God. She gratefully says to Jesus: "*Yes, Lord; but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their masters' table.*" (Matthew 15:27) A wild mongrel is not going to be inside the master's house to eat the crumbs from the floor. But a kunarion is a pet, a beloved pet. If those words sound familiar – we will pray words very similar in the Prayer of Humble Access – "*We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table; but you are the same Lord, whose character is always to have mercy.*" God

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, Sunday, August 16, 2020, Year A

loved even this Canaanite woman, and God's love reaches far beyond the Jews; just as it reached to each one of us today, who are "grafted in." Jesus told her, "*woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.*" *And her daughter was healed from that very hour.*" (Matthew 15:28) With great confidence, let each of one us prepare to receive His love, healing and mercy in great faith His Holy Sacrament.