

*Going to the Dogs*

Mark 7:24-27

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6 September 2009

You know me, how I love a challenge. If there's something controversial or offensive in the Bible (no! really?) I have to preach on it. Today we have this baffling story in which a woman comes to Jesus for healing for her daughter, and Jesus calls her a dog. Now, Christians can take offense at all kinds of things in the Bible, and we argue with one another about what parts we should be offended by, but surely we can all agree this is downright shocking. I mean, it's not just rude, it's *crude*. Sure, he calls the Pharisees a brood of vipers, but somehow that's different. It's tempting to say they deserve it, although perhaps we should question ourselves for that view, but at any rate, this woman has come to Jesus for help. This isn't a polemical debate; her daughter is ill. How could Jesus call her a dog?

(Incidentally, the Jesus Seminar folks are so offended by this that they have declared Jesus couldn't possibly have said it. This, in violation of the accepted technique of bible scholarship which says that if we find it offensive or nonsensical, then that's evidence that it really happened!)

This is a story that has always troubled me, and I have never yet found an interpretation that explains this in a satisfactory way. But you know what I'm always saying about parables, that they are puzzles for us to wrestle with, not for us to solve. If parables have no right answers, then maybe this story is a kind of parable too? Maybe we shouldn't be trying so hard to *fix* this, and instead let ourselves be challenged by it.

One thing many of the commentators said was that this story is connected to an incident that happens earlier in the chapter. Jesus is having a picnic with his disciples, and the Pharisees see them and complain that Jesus and crew have not properly washed their hands before the meal. They aren't worried about sanitation, but about the religious laws which require hand washing. Jesus tears into them for their hypocrisy, that they care more about nit-picky details of the law than they do about larger issues of justice and compassion and true righteousness, that is, being right with God and with our fellow human beings. He wraps up his argument with that famous quote about it not being what goes into us that makes us unclean, but what comes out of us, greed, malice, deceit, etc.

He then immediately goes to Tyre, which is a gentile area, and meets this woman who is not Jewish. In other words, he's going into exactly the kind of situation of "uncleanness" that he was arguing about with the Pharisees. They would have called this woman unclean. (By the way, in Islam dogs are considered unclean, and it's a horrible insult to call someone a dog. I don't know if that was true in ancient Judaism, but I wouldn't be surprised if it was.)

I could totally see Jesus having that argument in the back of his mind when he meets this woman, so that when he speaks to her, he's actually making the argument the Pharisees would. In other words, he's speaking ironically. Ancient near eastern people loved riddles and debates, and the woman meets Jesus head on. She sees his bet and raises him one, and Jesus instantly capitulates. Usually he tells people, "Your faith has made you well," but here he simply says, "For such a reply, you may go." It's as if he's saying, "Good one! You win!" As if he's making the point that the Pharisees' fixation on ritual cleanliness is shallow and stupid, and *of course* this woman's daughter should be healed, even though she is a foreign gentile dog.

That interpretation of the story relies on an awful lot of speculation, but we have to speculate when it comes to this story, and that interpretation fits much better with my understanding of Jesus than does the notion that he would insult this woman. The commentators I read further draw a number of other connections to Jesus' larger message. For example, even the crumbs from the table are powerful enough to heal fits with the theme we explored several weeks ago about the bread from heaven that gives life. Jesus is such a life-giving bread that even crumbs of him heal. Another theme is that the Pharisees saw Jesus eating with his disciples and took offense at him. It's as if they're always looking for a reason to be offended by him. Whereas Jesus deliberately, however ironically, "insults" this woman, yet her faith is so great she refuses to take insult, and so wins blessing. Those are all good points, and there are others besides that are well worth exploring. But for the rest of this sermon, I want to pick up on something a little different.

One of the commentators took issue with the fact that most people read this story and see the woman's great faith. The commentator pointed out, as I've already observed, that Jesus does not commend her for her faith but for her clever reply. I would disagree with the commentator on this: there are plenty of other stories where people overcome great obstacles in order to get healing from Jesus, and their persistence is seen as a sign of their faith. So yes, I do think this woman's persistence is a sign of her faith, that is, her confidence that Jesus has not only the ability but also the will to heal her daughter.

But rather than focusing on her faith, this commentator focused on the woman's love. That she loved her daughter so much that she would seek out this Jewish rabbi, who once again by the way is trying to remain hidden and travel incognito. She managed to snuff him out, to track him down and pursue him. So determined was she that she was even willing to endure insult from him, even willing to argue with him in order to win healing for her daughter.

A parenting blog I read recently had a discussion about how far we would go to protect and defend our kids. People often say they would kill to defend their kids, but while the sentiment is understandable, it's not really that realistic. We are very seldom called to go that far. Instead, this blog said, "If you harm my child, there will be consequences." That's a bit more realistic. There are all kinds of ways our children can be harmed, and not just in the melodramatic ways of being kidnapped or murdered. Our children can be hurt by labels. They can be labeled slow or difficult or troublemakers or whatever. It's our job as parents to advocate for our children. Not to say that we ignore any real issues they have, but if our kid is a troublemaker, it's our job as parents not to wash our hands of them, but to work to get the help they need to heal.

This woman's daughter was possessed by a demon. Who knows what that might mean? Autism. Epilepsy. Bipolar disorder. For that matter she could have been allergic to wheat! The point is, "possessed by a demon" meant "a hopeless case." More than that, unclean, dangerous, even evil. But this woman would not accept that. She would not give up on her daughter. She would go to any lengths to help her daughter, even daring to meet this Jewish rabbi, who if he was anything like those Pharisees, would probably insult her and drive her away. But even when he reacts the way she fears, she still sticks with it, argues with him, and wins healing for her daughter. (Imagine if she had killed Jesus for refusing her! Maybe there's another important lesson for us here, about debating and arguing with words rather than with blows, about the power of not taking offense even when someone is trying – however ironically – to insult us.)

But back to the point. This woman would go to any lengths for her daughter. Harm her daughter, and there will be consequences. Admirable, most certainly. But it's also what we expect of a parent. More to the point, why couldn't the Pharisees, if they're so holy, have this same kind of fierce protectiveness for all of God's children? And still more to the point: why don't we? Remember what Jesus said to the Pharisees, that it's not what goes into us that makes us unclean:

food, foreigners, ritual laws. Rather what makes us unclean is the stuff that comes out of us: evil thoughts, theft, murder, but also greed, malice, deceit, envy, arrogance. If you think about it, all of these things *harm other people*. All of these things are ways in which we try to hoard God's grace for ourselves and deny it to others.

On the other hand, what comes out of a parent for their child? Love, patience, gentleness, kindness – it's all the fruits of the Spirit as Paul talks about them. Those things make us clean. It's one of the wonderful, amazing, miraculous things about parenting, the ways in which it makes *me* a better person. Now, it doesn't always happen that way. Sometimes parenthood brings out the worst in people. That's when we call CPS. Also, far more often, parenthood brings out the good things in a person, but only in behalf of their own children. It's shocking how horrible parents can be toward other children, or especially to other parents. But in the best scenario, parenthood brings out not only those fruits of the spirit toward your own children, but toward everyone's children, toward all parents, toward all people whether or not they have children. And isn't that what Jesus was trying to teach us all along?

So as I wrestle with this disturbing story, this is the lesson I take at least this time. That the love and devotion this woman had for her child, how far she was willing to go, what she was willing to endure without taking offense – that's the kind of love and devotion we should have for everyone. We should go to any lengths for each and every one of God's children. And when someone responds to us with offense and insult, we should let that slide right off us, keeping our goal of love in our sights. Dialogue, engage, argue, but never lose sight of the blessing waiting for us even in the person who appears to insult us.

Wow. That sounds an awful lot like the gospel to me.