

THE DAY THE GOSPEL WENT TO THE DOGS

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

A high-school friend from Atlanta posted this story on Facebook this week. The story is from one of her friends who lives in Montgomery, Alabama:

I was in the grocery store this afternoon and behind me, in line, was a teenage girl that I would classify as “grungy” (not being specific so that I don’t offend anyone). When I took my groceries to my car, the woman in the car next to me was out of her car looking underneath it. I asked if I could help and she said her receipt had blown under the car. Neither she nor I could reach it. As we were bending down, another person came over and asked if she could help . . . Yep . . . the grungy girl. As sweet as she could be. There’s a lesson in this . . .

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.” And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” . . . Jesus 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.” There’s a lesson in this . . .

Remember what we confessed to God a few minutes ago? *Merciful God, we confess that, just like Jesus’ disciples, we too sometimes lose patience with people who need our help and support. Like the disciples, we find ourselves wishing they would just go away and leave us in peace.* A charitable translation of what the disciples said to Jesus that day in the district of Tyre and Sidon would be, “Give her what she wants, for she keeps shouting after us.” A more honest and accurate translation, however, is what we hear this morning: “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” Or, in the spirit of the story that opened today’s sermon: “Lord, send this grungy, Canaanite, pagan, unbelieving woman away.”

Every year at freshman orientation and senior graduation at Wallace-Rose Hill High School, Principal M.D. Guthrie reminds the student body, “Once a Bulldog, always a Bulldog!” When we took Natalie for orientation at UNC-Asheville, we met Rocky, the bulldog mascot. We remembered what Mr. Guthrie said! When Natalie returned to campus last week for her senior year, she posted Mr. Guthrie’s reminder on her Facebook page.

For a lot of people around here, being called a dog is not a bad thing — or at least, being called a Bulldog. However, most of us don’t like to be called dogs. And if something is said to be “going to the dogs,” you know it’s not a good thing. That phrase —

“going to the dogs” — is thought to have originated in ancient China, where dogs were not allowed inside the walls of cities. Stray dogs roamed around outside the city walls and scavenged among the trash and garbage that was thrown over the walls. Criminals and outcasts were often sent to live among the trash and with the dogs outside the city walls. Their lives were literally “going to the dogs,” while their lives were taking a bad turn.¹

Jesus’ disciples must have thought the gospel was going to the dogs that day. They apparently were none too happy about this woman pestering Jesus and them about her demon-possessed daughter. Matthew describes the woman, not just as a Gentile but as a *Canaanite*. The Canaanites were the traditional enemies of the Jews. The disciples would have seen the woman as an idolater, a pagan, ritually unclean, outcast, not fit to be spoken to or dealt with. Their solution? “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” Isn’t it interesting that this is exactly what the disciples tell Jesus to do with the crowd of 5000 just a few verses earlier? “When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, ‘This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.’” (Matthew 14:15)

We’re kind of accustomed to the disciples not getting it, right? Again and again, Jesus’ twelve followers don’t grasp what’s going on. Perhaps in their defense, we can say they were only trying to protect Jesus from the crowds and the constant demands. On the other hand, many times they come across as impatient, uncaring, even prejudiced towards some of the people who ask Jesus for help. Over the years, we’ve come to accept this picture of the disciples, warts and all.

What about Jesus in this story with the Canaanite woman? We like to think about Jesus — we *want* to think of Jesus — as kind and compassionate and accepting of all people at all times. But that’s not the picture we get of Jesus in this story, at least not at first. This desperate mother is literally screaming for help for her daughter. She must have been at her wits’ end. It is certainly significant and not a little bit ironic that this grungy, outcast, pagan Canaanite woman calls Jesus “Lord, Son of David,” which he most certainly is as the Jewish Messiah. It makes you wonder how she knew that about him.

At the very least, a Canaanite woman calling him “Lord, Son of David” should have gotten Jesus’ attention. But Matthew tells us very brusquely, “he did not answer her at all.” When Jesus did finally answer the desperate woman, he pretty much told her, “I haven’t come here to help you. I have a more important mission to accomplish.” His response to her persistence? For all intents and purposes, he calls her a dog — “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Some people have tried to soften the blow by pointing out that the word translated “dogs” can mean “puppies” or even “house dogs/pets.” Still, it’s true that, for the most part, the Jews looked at dogs with utter disgust because they were scavengers and came into contact with garbage and dead things.

As I read and thought about this unusual and challenging story, I imagined several different endings.

* 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.” So Jesus took the child’s hand in his and ordered the demon to leave her; and the demon convulsed the girl and left her.

But that’s not what happened!

* OR, His disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” So Jesus said to the Canaanite woman, “Go away. I don’t have the time or patience for you. Besides, my mission is only to the Jews — not for the likes of you.”

But that’s not what happened!

* OR He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” So the Canaanite woman sadly and humbly lowered her eyes, turned, and slunk away, taking in one more insult and rejection.

But that’s not what happened!

Instead, the Canaanite woman was persistent:

* in coming to Jesus in the first place

* in the face of the disciples’ rejection

* in response to Jesus’ initial silence

* in answer to Jesus’ comments about his mission to the Jews and not to the outsiders

I always imagine the tone of voice and inflection of the characters who speak in the gospels. For some reason, even though she came and knelt before Jesus (which implies humility, obedience, and even worship), I don’t hear her voice as meek and uncertain and 100% submissive. Instead, I imagine this grungy, outcast, Canaanite woman looking Jesus straight in the eye and uttering a most profound and insightful theological truth about God’s grace and mercy: “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”

Who knows? Maybe this distraught mother had heard what Jesus did in that deserted place when he fed 5000 men plus the women and children with bread and fish. Maybe she had heard that even after all ate and were filled, there were twelve baskets full of broken pieces and crumbs left over. Maybe this woman is theologically astute enough and socially bold enough and parentally desperate enough to claim God’s boundless grace and mercy for herself and, as a result, for the rest of the Gentiles, also. If this Canaanite woman had burst into song, like so many biblical characters do when they encounter God and receive God’s grace, she might have shouted/screamed, “There’s a wideness in God’s mercy, like the wideness of the sea. There’s a kindness in God’s justice, which is more than liberty. For the love of God is broader than the measures of the mind. And the heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind.” (Hymn #435, There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy; the second hymn of the day)

Let's imagine another ending to the story at this point:

* Then Jesus answered her, "You impudent dog! How dare you, a Canaanite woman, address me, the Jewish Messiah, like that."

But that's not what happened!

Instead, Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." The Canaanite woman is living proof of what Jesus had taught the crowd about true purity and cleanliness: It's not what goes into a person that defiles, it's what comes out of the heart that defiles. By the same logic, when faith comes out of this Canaanite woman's heart, she lets everyone know — the disciples and even Jesus himself — that she knows God's grace and mercy are for her, even if she might be seen as nothing more than a dog eating the crumbs from under the table.

How do we apply this story to our own lives? To help with that, let me share some thoughts from a sermon I read called "Rethinking Our Ideas About God."

"What ideas of God do we have to rethink today? Perhaps the same ones that the disciples had to rethink as they watched this dramatic dialogue between Jesus and a Canaanite woman.

"We need to rethink the idea that God belongs to us. That we are more special to God than other people, nationalities, races, or cultures.

"We need to rethink the idea that we know exactly whom God loves and whom God doesn't love.

"We need to rethink the idea that we have it right, this business of faith in God, because that sounds an awful lot like the Pharisee who prayed, 'Lord, I thank you that I am not like other men.'

"We need the humble persistence of this Canaanite woman."²

Let us pray: Lord God, you are a redeeming God. It is not your desire that any of your children should suffer. You hear their cries and you come from heaven to save. As we remember your saving purposes, give us minds, hearts, and wills to hear your Word to us, and then to live it. We pray this in the name of Christ the Savior. Amen.

NOTES

¹Tim Bowen, "Phrase of the week: to go to the dogs," at www.onestopenenglish.com.

²Chuck Warnock, "Sermon: Rethinking Our Ideas About God," at www.chuckwarnockblog.wordpress.com.