

Every Dog Has Her Day

William Cwirla

Matthew 15:21–28

She was desperate. She had no one to turn to. Her daughter was deeply oppressed by some sort of demon. No description of the symptoms, but the woman is at the end of her hope. Jesus is all she has left. She heard He was coming into her region, the district of Tyre and Sidon, the far north coast county named after the great grandson of Noah. Canaanite territory. The Canaanites were the inhabitants of the land before the Israelites came. They were the people the Israelites were to supposed to have driven from the land but didn't. Needless to say, Israelites didn't have much to do with Canaanites. The rabbis even called them "dogs," which was about as low as it got. Filthy, garbage picking scavengers. A respectable Israelite wouldn't even talk to a Canaanite if one came up to them on the street.

This Canaanite woman comes up to Jesus. Strike one. Canaanites don't come up to Israelites unless a fight is about to break out. She's a woman. Strike two. Women don't approach men much less rabbis. She cries out to Him. Strike three. Women are not to address men in public. But Jesus is her last resort. She knows who she is; she knows who Jesus is. She's a Canaanite; He's an Israelite. So she does her best Israelite imitation: "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David."

"Son of David" is Israelite talk; messiah talk. "Son of David" is what the Israelites were looking for in a messiah. Perhaps Jesus wouldn't notice who she was. Perhaps He wouldn't care. Perhaps He'd be sympathetic and compassionate. "My daughter is severely oppressed by a demon."

What would you have expected Jesus to do? Most of us would have expected Jesus to heal that woman's daughter. He'd done that for others, including non-Israelites. But Jesus didn't say a word to her. Didn't even acknowledge her presence. Turned a hard, stony gaze away from her. And so she turned to his band of disciples. Maybe they had some influence. You know, if you can't get to Jesus talk to His friends, right? Have them put in a good word for you. "Please, please talk to Jesus for me. Tell Him my daughter is sick. She has a demon. I know He can heal her. Please talk to Him for me."

But the disciples are Israelite men too. Same three strikes against her. Instead of interceding for her, they beg Jesus to get rid of her. “Send her away, she’s a pain. She’s causing a scene. She keeps on crying after us, Jesus. Tell this Canaanite to get lost.”

“I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” Jesus answers. Answers whom? The woman or the disciples? It looks like Jesus is talking to the disciples in her hearing. He’s agreeing with them. “You’re right, boys. These bothersome Canaanite needs to get lost because I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Right?” “Yeah, Jesus. That’s right. Messiah is supposed to clean up this place of people like her. You’re pro-Israel. You’re going to put Israel on the map. You don’t have time for this Canaanite. So let’s get back with the program, Jesus.”

But she’s persistent. She won’t take silence for an answer. She comes and prostrates herself before Jesus, literally touches her forehead to the ground in deep humility and worship. And she loses all that “Son of David” talk and speaks it straight from her broken heart: “Lord, help me.” It doesn’t get more broken than that. Imagine all this happening on a public street in front of onlookers.

This time Jesus speaks to her directly. “It isn’t right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.” She’s down and He appears to kick her. How utterly cruel, heartless, uncaring, unsympathetic, unfeeling Jesus appears to be. Oh sure, you can check in the Greek and find that Jesus uses a diminutive and calls her a little lap dog instead of a big nasty dog, but a dog is a dog nonetheless and in the ears of a 1st century Canaanite that would be heard as an ethnic slur no matter how delightfully diminutive it might have been. Jesus used the “D-word.”

What would you have done? Leave in a huff? Find another savior? Tell Him off to His face? What do you do when Jesus appears to give you the cold shoulder? When He seems to turn His gaze away from you? When He treats you like a dog? This hits hard on our sense of entitlement. We feel entitled to things. We think God owes us just for showing up and for trying hard. Luther once commented that we easily say that we are poor, miserable sinners. The words come out of our mouths easily enough. But when someone dares to rebuke us for our sin we get all defensive and self-justifying. “How dare you call me a sinner!” Even more so when God treats us like sinners that we say we are. “How dare He ignore my prayers! How dare He turn His face from me! How dare He close His hand of blessing! I’m His child; I’m entitled.”

The Canaanite woman didn't do any of that. Instead she did something utterly remarkable and unpredictable. She heard something in Jesus' harsh words that faith could grasp. Something that she could hold Him to. It was in that deeply insulting word "dog." And all she had to do was admit that that is who she was. A dog. And from that place, which seems to our eyes to be utter humiliation and disgrace, she finds the hidden blessing. "Yes, Lord, a dog I may be. But even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." She holds Jesus to His words and won't let Him go, even when those words seem to scream out "no!" She seeks His "yes" inside of His "no."

Luther preached it this way:

What a superb and wonderful object lesson this is, therefore, to teach us what a mighty, powerful, all-availing thing faith is. Faith takes Christ captive in his word, when he's angriest, and makes out of his cruel words a comforting inversion, as we see here. "You say," the woman responds, "that I am a dog. Let it be, I will gladly be a dog; now give me the consideration that you give a dog." Thus she catches Christ with his own words, and he is happy to be caught. "Very well," she says, "if I am a dog, I ask no more than a dog's rights. I am not a child nor am I of Abraham's seed, but you are a rich Lord and set a lavish table. Give your children the bread and a place at the table; I do not wish that. Let me, merely like a dog, pick up the crumbs under the table, allowing me that which the children don't need or even miss, the crumbs, and I will be content therewith." So she catches Christ, the Lord, in his own words and with that wins not only the right of a dog, but also that of the children. Now then where will he go, our dear Jesus? He let himself be made captive, and must comply. Be sure of this: that's what he most deeply desires...

Jesus speaks to her again; but now she's honored by Him. "O woman," He says. An honorific title. It's the same title He gives to His mother. "O woman, great is your faith!" Great indeed! Last week we heard Jesus chide Peter for his "little faith" because he stopped believing that he could walk on water by the power of Jesus' word. But this woman trusted Jesus even when Jesus appeared to turn His back on her and reject her. That's the picture of faith's tenacity, my friends. That is great faith, the kind of faith that can only be worked by the Spirit. And take notice, please, that it is the outsider, the Canaanite "dog" who is in possession of this great faith. Not the Israelite. Not the disciple. This despised Canaanite. It is all by grace, undeserved kindness.

From that very hour, her daughter was healed. The demons are no match for Jesus. No big deal at all, really. Just a word will do it. “Let it be done as you desire.” That’s all it takes from the lips of Jesus. The darkness and demonic realm have no choice but to obey Him. Even from a distance. Jesus had come to do battle with the devil, with the darkness of Sin, with Death. He came to deal the decisive blow on the cross. And even here, the power of His cross is evident. A simple word from a distance is all that it takes. Israel had its exorcists, but none like this. This is the Lord, and what He says goes.

The healing is not so much for this woman or for her faith as it is for Jesus’ disciples and for us. He’s training them in what great faith looks like. It looks like a broken and desperate Canaanite woman who embraces her “doggyness” and doggedly pursues the promise hidden under Jesus’ seeming rejection. He’s teaching the disciples, and us, to hang on to His words and trust them and look for the promise in them and not to trust our feelings or even how God seems to be treating us. Cling to Jesus’ words and run with them. If He says “you’re nothing but a hound dog” then embrace it and run straight to His table for the richest of crumbs that fall from it.

And if He says you are a dog of a sinner in need of forgiveness, then like the apostle Paul claim the top dog and be “chief of sinners” and come to the Word of forgiveness and the Lord’s table to receive not crumbs but the bread of life and the wine of heaven, the Body and Blood of Him who went to the dogs to save you.

In the name of Jesus,

Amen

SOURCE

William Cwirla · Matthew 15:21-28 / Proper 15A/ 14 August 2011 / Holy Trinity – Hacienda Heights, CA · Text: Matthew 15:21-28
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Hacienda Heights, CA (htlcms.org), “Every Dog Has Her Day”, posted 2011-08-14
(<https://htlcms.org/2011/08/every-dog-has-her-day/>).