

September 6, 2009

Bits of Grace

MARK 7:24-30

Rev. Darryl C. Evans

Our reading today is shocking. Here we have a mother who is desperate for her child. Her daughter is possessed by a demon, and she goes to Jesus and begs Him to heal her daughter. And Jesus responds by calling her a dog.

That sounds harsh. That is not the type of thing that we would expect Jesus to say, and we want to figure out what is going on here. This is exactly the kind of passage that I like to look-up and see what this would have meant way in far-away ancient Israel thousands of years ago. I wonder if maybe there was a different meaning, or connotation, back then about the word “dog” because it bothers us to hear it. And if we were to look it up, we would learn that in that time, in that place, calling someone a dog ... well, it means pretty much the same thing then as it does today. ...Not a compliment. Even in Jesus’ day, it was not a desirable term.

In this context, calling someone a “dog” basically is calling them dirty. We know dogs get into things – like eating trash, or doing just some of the things that dogs do. ...In fact, I have a dog; and some things she does make no sense to me – like why certain items are apparently desirable for eating. ...She’s a dog, and she’s not always real clean. But this is why some rabbis used the term “dog” as a metaphor to refer to Gentiles – because non-Jews were “unclean” in terms of not following the Law of Moses. This means that since we are not Jews, we identify with the woman in the story. This means that if we had been there, we, too, would have been dogs.

Maybe this is part of the reason that this story is one of the hardest sayings of Jesus. Some people try to soften it. Some say that Jesus was tired because He had just performed a bunch of miracles and then He had traveled a great distance – just as our reading said that He “went away” to the region of Tyre. Some people guess that Jesus was simply tired from His conflict with the Pharisees and His journey, and now He wanted to hide because our reading again says that He “entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there.”

Others try to soften it by saying that the Greek term used for the word “dog” could be worse. The word used does not refer to a dirty mutt on the street, but to a dog that was more of a house pet. I don’t buy these attempts to soften what Jesus said; I think it is just a hard saying. If someone were to call you or me a dog, I don’t think our first reaction would be to ask what *kind* of dog they meant; it still wouldn’t be a compliment.

So, what is going on here? Does this sound like the Jesus we know? (This is why some people like to follow the lectionary readings, because it includes hard readings like this one – readings that we may have skipped over if we were picking them ourselves.)

First, let’s consider the woman. Someone has told her that Jesus is in Tyre, and she immediately comes to Jesus, and she bows down at His feet. She comes, full of faith – and as a desperate parent, caring about her child – and she begs Jesus to heal her daughter. We could even imagine in our mind’s eye that perhaps Jesus is reclining at a table as she bows at His feet begging for help, so that she was physically located beside the household pets in the very place that they begged for food.

Then we come to this interesting exchange of Jesus calling her a dog, followed by her quick and confusing response. How this woman knew what to say is striking. And it is even more interesting when we remember that in Mark’s Gospel even the Twelve Disciples hardly

ever understand Jesus' parables – Jesus has to always explain them in private. But here we have a pagan – someone from outside Israel – who had not been with Jesus all along and she understands the parable right away! And she understands it by herself – with no one explaining it to her.

Jesus calls her a dog, and she doesn't say Jesus is wrong. She doesn't contradict Him. She doesn't say she is faultless; She certainly doesn't say she deserves this healing. She doesn't; neither do we. Instead, she enters into the parable. If she is a dog, well at least she should get crumbs from the table like all the other dogs. In one sentence, she affirms both Jesus' power and her powerlessness; she recognizes His authority, and she does so in great humility.

Now before we even explore her unusual response a little more, realize that even for this encounter to occur was shocking in itself, and before we think too much about simply what this woman has done, let us not forget how much Jesus has done. A number of things had to happen for Jesus and this woman to simply meet, a lot of barriers had to be crossed.

First, Jews and Gentiles did not mix. Jews strove to be ritually pure before God, and so they did not associate with people who did not believe in Yahweh, because they did not want to become ceremonially unclean. They were also different ethnicities. Jesus was a descendant of Abraham; the woman was descended from Syrian Phoenicia.

Not only were Jews and Gentiles different religions and ethnicities, but also men and women kept their distance. In fact, even some synagogues today still separate the men from the women.

Then we come to the problem of geography. They are in the region of Tyre. Tyre had a long history of being bitter enemies of Jews. Tyre was known for siding against Jews during the Maccabean Revolt, which is forever remembered as one of the great Jewish victories in history in the celebration of Hanukkah.

So the fact that Jesus and this woman met, all kinds of boundaries were crossed. Different religions. Different ethnicities. Different genders. Different places. A history of antagonism between the two, and on top of all of that Jesus was trying to keep His presence there a secret.

Part of the reason Jesus answered the way He did, is because the Gospel was sent first to Jews, then to Gentiles. God established His covenant with Israel, and it was only after Jesus had died and was raised that the covenant was open to all. Through Jesus, we are now part of Israel. We have been grafted in, as the Letter to the Romans tells us. Put another way, we have a glimpse into salvation history. We are right at the point when the way the covenant is administered is changing as we move from the Old Testament to the New Testament. This story illustrates God's plan for the salvation of humankind: to Jews first then Gentiles.

And we see that the time for everyone to be a child of God through faith is coming, just as we are reading about the Gentile woman with all those boundaries that stand in the way – and yet she is still able to connect with Jesus. Somehow this woman was able to see who Jesus is. She knew He had power. She knew He had authority. She believed that Jesus could easily heal her daughter. And she knew how gracious and loving Jesus is because she comes unafraid despite all the boundaries that should have prevented her from coming. Somehow this woman knew that not only was Jesus sufficient, but that in Christ there was a vast surplus of power to cast out the demon from her daughter.

If this seems shocking, it is. When anyone begins to grasp who Jesus is, it is absolutely amazing. Just as we read in our affirmation of faith from Colossians that *"¹⁵He is the image of the invisible God...for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created...[and]...all things*

have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell... ”

Try to wrap your mind around that. It is shocking: Jesus is the image of God. Everything is created through Him and for Him. If this is true, then no one can come to Jesus and have any grounds to make demands from Him. The woman cannot demand Jesus heals her daughter, because her daughter already belongs to Him. Her daughter was made through Him and for Him. You – your life – was made for Jesus and through Jesus. Even the whole creation is God’s creation; it already belongs to Him.

So this woman does not come making a demand. She does not try to claim her rights. And she certainly doesn’t ask for what she deserves, because the last thing that she – or us – want from God is what we deserve. Because we are all sinners, and wrongdoing deserves punishment. So instead, she comes to Jesus powerless. And she doesn’t say she is entitled to anything; instead, she simply begs for grace. And Jesus never turns away anyone who comes in faith looking for grace. The woman is so convinced of who Jesus is that she doesn’t need much. She doesn’t ask for special treatment. She doesn’t ask for a place at the table with the Jews. Instead she asks for merely the smallest bit of grace.

When she enters into the parable – knowing she does not live under the Law of Moses; knowing of all the barriers that exist between them; knowing that she is undeserving – she still knows that God is so great that even the smallest bit of grace – even a crumb under the table is enough. It is as if to say that even the tiniest bit of grace is so powerful it is able to drive out demons. Because what God has done in Jesus Christ is so incredibly overwhelming that there is not a mere sufficiency of grace, there is an awesome surplus of it!

Jesus spoke to her the way He did in part because in God’s Plan for the world the promises came first to Israel, and then through Israel to the rest of the world. The Day was coming – and has now come – that all that nations are blessed through Jesus.

And even in this one story we see that the Messiah has come for the whole world. Jesus has done so much for us. Jesus has broken down all the barriers that we set up. Barriers of gender, of race, of culture, of geography, of everything. This woman never would have met Jesus if He had not first traveled so far to reach Tyre. Healing her daughter was the only thing He did in that place. Then He left. And if Jesus is still doing this, then as His Children we are also called to break down barriers that separate us.

Why did this story happen the way it did? Why did Jesus say what He did? I don’t know. Maybe what it is really saying is that God works for our good in ways than we can never understand. Maybe Jesus wanted this woman to express her faith so that she would be a light to those around her. To witness to the Jews in that place. To witness that Jesus is Lord of All. To witness that Jesus is the Messiah of the Whole World.

Maybe it was so that she could show her faith that not only did she recognize who Jesus was, but that she found her life in Jesus’ parable. She finds her life in Christ and by entering into that story, she allows herself to be claimed by it. Maybe she is showing that even Gentiles can claim the word, and can enter into the story of God’s plan, no matter what their worldly status is.

The temporary barriers that divide us were about to be swept away. And soon, this woman, like all the Gentiles, would not be seen as dogs – they would be Children of the Covenant alongside the others. Soon she would not be like a dog hunting for bits of bread under the Table – but like us today – we are not under the Table, but we may have a seat at the Lord’s Table. That as a people of faith we are full participants in this Sacrament. And here we receive not bits and morsels of grace, but a meal in which we can drink and eat with the Risen Lord. As we too,

come to Jesus, even at this Table – let us lift up our hearts to Jesus, asking Him to give us grace in those places and with those people – that we need His healing touch.

How sufficient is Jesus! How great is He that even a small peak at Him and this woman knows that He is able to heal her daughter. How great is Jesus, that He has this plan for salvation for all – Jews and Gentiles. How great is Jesus that His grace is so powerful that even a tiny little morsel of it is all this woman needs to receive what she asked for. In Christ there is not simply a sufficiency of God’s grace, but a surplus of it!

Maybe the real point of this shocking story – and this harsh response of Jesus – is to catch our attention and to drive home the point that is so hard for us to get – the point that “Jesus never tires of saving anyone who understands the power of even a little grace”.¹

One last thing: so often in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus will heal someone and then He’ll instruct them not to tell anyone. But that does not happen here. She simply believed and left. She went home, saw her daughter was well, and was free to tell all those Jewish enemies of Tyre what God had done. The story of this woman does not simply drive home the power of grace, but she shows us that when we have truly been touched by God’s grace, we then have the irrepressible joy of telling others about it. May that joy of spreading the good news of God’s grace be something to which all us can say, “Amen.”

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Summer Service at 10am

¹ Barnes, Craig. *An Extravagant Mercy* (Ann Arbor: Servant Publications, 2003) 13.