

GOING TO THE DOGS?

Sermon, August 20, 2017
Matthew 15:10-28

The last time we looked at this passage in Matthew was six years ago, and I then told you about something that happened when I ran the Newport 5-mile Pie Run Thanksgiving Day 2010 (*actually, "running" is a generous term for my rather plodding pace ... but I WAS faster than I am now!*). It was about Mile Two that a perky young(er) woman ran up alongside me and engaged me in a bit of conversation. She seemed pleasant, maybe mid-forties, and I'll be honest, she wasn't too hard to look at. I found myself picking up my pace a little, straightening my back, pulling in my stomach ... you know, all those things middle-aged guys tend to do in such situations ... and then she said, *"I'm feeling much better now, but when I woke this morning, I really felt like _____."* I won't repeat what she said she felt like ... let's just say it was a rather colorful (*read: vulgar*) metaphor. Now, I'm no stranger to hearing colorful language; it's just that in this situation it seemed so, well, incongruous ... it was almost as if this attractive woman had suddenly grown a five inch wart on her nose! Because of what came out of her mouth, she went from class to crass, from cute to crude, from attractive to somewhat repulsive. Now, she could have been a very pleasant person; initially, she had impressed me as such. But to me, what so casually came out of her mouth belied that first impression. I mumbled back, *"I, uh, hope you continue to feel better,"* and let her run on ahead as I dropped my pace to my usual plod.

As mentioned just now in the Time With the Children, Jesus makes clear that the destructive and/or demeaning or vulgar attitudes we harbor in our hearts and let loose through our lips ... in short, the bad things we say ... are far more damaging and polluting than what goes into our mouths. In short, Jesus says to His disciples that what we say, matters! What's clearly inferred is you can tell a lot about a person, particularly how "clean" or pure a person really is, by listening to what comes out of the person's mouth (*to mix metaphors from the children's message, like a tube of toothpaste, the contents of a person's heart are exposed under pressure; when "squeezed," what is in one's heart will come out*). And then, in the very next paragraph, we see Jesus let loose with a derogatory racial epithet? That seems ... inconsistent, at best. When we last looked at this passage six years ago, I asked, *"Now, be honest. How many of you think Jesus seemed a little rude in our Gospel reading?"* Did we actually read that Jesus called some poor woman a dog? Yes, we did. There's just no getting around it. In effect, Jesus looks at His disciples like Bill Murray looks at his partners in that old movie **Ghostbusters**, and says, "OK, she's a dog." What's going on?

We all know words are made very different in connotation by the tone of voice and by the look of the eye of the speaker. There are things we can say with a smile, but which can't be said with a straight face without offense. I can look at one of my children with an endearing smile and say, "You crazy, mixed up kid!" (*Which is something my Aunt Carol used to always say to my brothers and me; in fact, she still does, even though we're now all in our sixties.*) Or, I can glare at my son and say with a scowl, "You crazy, mixed up kid." Using the exact same words, a totally different message can be communicated by the tone and look. I'm convinced Jesus was engaging in a kind of humorous *banter* with this woman, and He was doing so in order to get His disciples' attention. I'm convinced He was using ironic humor to address something important, and that was the racial and ethnic biases of His followers. I think it's the only interpretation that makes sense. I mean, note the context of this passage! Jesus just got done explaining that what comes out of a person's mouth matters, that what comes out of a person's mouth will tell you much about that person's heart, that the words we use go a long way to determining who's "dirty" and who's "clean." I'm convinced Jesus is using the epithet "dog" like my Aunt Carol used the epithet "crazy mixed up kid" ... with a mock seriousness and a transparent irony. And I also think the woman *got* it and responded accordingly!

The background is that Jesus and His disciples had gone for some rest and relaxation to the region of Tyre and Sidon, two Mediterranean coastal towns in what would be now southern Lebanon, and we know from history the Israelites didn't get along well with the people who lived there. In fact, many Israelites despised the people who dwelled in that region ... the Jewish historian Josephus, who wrote roughly in the time of Christ, wrote, *"The people of Tyre are our bitterest enemies."* Then this particular woman from that area approaches and cries out, *"Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me!"* In verse 23 we are told, *"Jesus did not answer a word."* Now, we're told this woman's daughter is suffering terribly, she tries to get Jesus' attention, and He acts like He doesn't hear? It seems He is deliberately ignoring this woman. Well, I think He is putting on an act to test His disciples, to see what they will do in the face of Jesus' apparent rudeness. Do they really understand what He's about? Do they really understand His compassion for everybody, including Gentiles and mothers with disturbed children, and will they challenge Him on this apparent inconsistency? Do they get it? Will they call Him on this apparently rude behavior? Well, apparently not. Their response is to say to Jesus, *"Send her away. She keeps crying out after us!"*

Just as an aside, note the “us.” She hasn’t said anything to the disciples, has she? The “us” seems a little grandiose. Who’s she crying out after? She’s after Jesus ... but the followers of Jesus rather generously include themselves in Jesus’ “reputation” ... *“If you’re calling Jesus, well, you must be calling US.”* There’s a little lesson here (*and even a sermon in itself*) that bears noting, but in short we in the church need to remember people often come here seeking after Jesus, not us. They aren’t necessarily coming here because **we** are all that attractive or engaging or smart or winsome or talented; they are drawn to *Jesus*. Often they are coming here to the church seeking Him and His help. They may not know our customs or dress like us or know how to “act” in a church, but they ARE coming seeking Jesus. And maybe Jesus waits to see what we will do. Will we treat them like outcasts, misfits, animals? Or will we receive them, love them, welcome them in the name of Christ *and* direct them to Him? The disciples, apparently, choose the former.

They say to Jesus, *“She’s bothering us, send her away.”* Jesus responds, *“I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.”* Why does He say THIS? Again, I think the only plausible explanation is Jesus is using ironic humor. In other places He makes it clear He has come for the whole world. He’s not willing *any* should perish. But here Jesus appears to echo their biases and prejudices, and they sort of expect Him to continue, *“Yes, I’m sent only to God’s favorites; I have no time for the Gentile riffraff. Yes, send her away.”* But He doesn’t go beyond that “lost sheep of Israel” line; He says it, then He watches to see how they will respond. Will any of them stand up for her? Will any of them speak up for this very human mother who is in agony over her daughter’s suffering? Or, will they all just continue to nod their heads and say, *“Yep, she’s not one of us, she doesn’t belong here, send her away!”*

Now, the woman is watching this little drama and certainly taking it all in. She knows these friends of Jesus really don’t want her around, that they would really like to be rid of her, yet she stays ... because I think she catches what Jesus is subtly communicating, and may even be a bit entertained and encouraged by it all! Verse 25: *“The woman came and knelt before him, ‘Lord, help me!’ ”* The disciples are watching. The tension starts to build, as Jesus knew it would, because their “theology” tells them this woman is to be ignored, rejected, turned away ... yet something inside them surely begins to be moved when they come face to face with this flesh and blood human being. This is another human being, a person just like them. This is the cry of a desperate mother for a beloved daughter who is suffering. Like any loving parent, she can feel her daughter’s torments, and she is desperate to have her daughter helped. Now picture Jesus looking at His disciples, then saying to the woman, *“It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to their dogs.”* I’ve read all kinds of nuanced explanations and strained rationalizations about this odd response in various commentaries over the years, but I’m convinced that at face value, this is nothing more than a racially charged epithet. Dogs in the Middle East were scavengers and garbage eaters; unclean animals. The “children” were the Israelites. The dogs were the Gentiles, including this woman. Jesus is giving voice to their biases, and in so doing He forces the disciples to look at themselves in the “mirror” of their biases. He was saying out loud exactly what they may have been thinking, that she was little more than an *animal*. He was showing them the cruelty of their presumptions. *“This is what it would look and sound like if you actually followed your thoughts through and treated a person this way to her face.”* This is not some scavenging animal; this is a PERSON who needs help and salvation!

One interesting thing to note: There are two Greek words that could be used for dogs, and Jesus uses the more diminutive form, which can be translated *little doggie*. The word Jesus uses is for a little dog, a dog-ette, a puppy. What doesn’t translate well into our English versions is that the woman picks up on the diminutive form of the word “dogs” and uses the same diminutive suffix in the word translated “crumbs.” Some scholars think she actually *invents* a word here; this comeback of hers might literally be rendered, *“Yes, Lord, but even the little dog-ettes get the little crumb-ettes from their masters’ table.”* And if you can imagine her saying this with a knowing smile on her face, you’ll realize she is coming back at Jesus with wit and grit and grace! A sense of humor is a wonderful thing to maintain, and especially during times of difficulty. I think there is an element of playfulness about her, as if she’s bantering with Jesus. Jesus then turns to face the woman, and I’m sure with a big smile on His face, says, *“Woman, you have great faith!”* As if to say, *“You get it! You have displayed greater faith than My disciples here; they **didn’t** get it and they’ve been following Me for years! Woman, your prayers are answered!”* And we’re told her daughter was healed that very hour.

Two quick things in closing: (1) Maybe some of us here are where the disciples were. There’s someone or some *ones* in our lives we’re having a hard time offering authentic, Christ-like love to. Will we say, *“God, will you help me love this person? Will you help me speak and act with compassion? Will you help me direct them to Jesus?”* This is the will of God for us; this is the way of Christ, to love each person God brings into our lives and help direct them to Jesus. (2) Or, maybe some of us here are where this woman is today. You’ve cried out to Jesus for help, but at first He seems silent, He seems aloof, He seems indifferent, and maybe even His people have seemed downright hostile toward you. But I encourage you to keep going with all the grace and grit and faith and optimism and even humor you can muster, and you can bank on this ... our Lord will be good and loving and even gregarious in His grace toward you.