

Pentecost 14A Sermon 081708
Genesis 45:1-15; Psalm 133
Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32; Matthew 15: (10-20), 21-28

In the name of the God of all – Father, Son & Holy Spirit, Amen.

Jesus said, “It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.” Who are the dogs in your life? Who is it in your world who is so inconsequential that they don't rate being treated as well as you treat your friends and loved ones?

When Jesus was confronted by the woman in today's Gospel story He responded in a way that is most uncharacteristic for the Jesus we're used to. He and the disciples had just survived the storm on the Sea of Galilee, and then Jesus got into this disagreement with the Pharisees who were trying to discredit Him, so He and the disciples left the ever-growing crowds in Galilee and went off into the land of the Gentiles, the land of Canaan. There they could be away from all of the “faithful Jews” who gave them no rest – either wanting miracles or calling Jesus out for failing to live by the Law.

Canaan is the land founded by Noah's son Ham – you remember Ham, he was the one of Noah's three sons who was shunned by his family after he saw Noah one night, drunk and naked. Noah cursed Ham, whose name he changed to Canaan, and vowed that Canaan would forever be cursed and that his descendants would always be slaves to the descendents of his brothers. Thus, in ancient Israel, the people of Canaan were *thought of* as cursed and were felt to be beneath the lowliest of Jews.

So the Canaanite woman comes hounding Jesus, yelling at Him incessantly, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon!” Usually in scenes like this, the disciples want the bothersome person to go away and leave them alone, while Jesus compassionately tells them to let the person come to Him, and then He grants whatever He is asked. But not here. This is a different story altogether. Here, the woman yells and pleads for help and Jesus does what? He IGNORES her. Jesus, the compassionate lover of souls; Jesus the Good Shepherd; gentle Jesus, meek and mild; IGNORES her. But wait ... it gets worse.

When she persistently keeps at Him, He doesn't smile at her and say, “My daughter, your prayers have been answered. Go in peace.” No, when she asks for His help, He tells her, “It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.” This is one ticked off Jesus. This is Jesus trying to make a SERIOUS point. He knows what His ministry is, and that ministry does NOT include this woman or her demon-possessed daughter. She is not who He came to save – in fact, she's not even a “who” she is a “what.” She is an animal, without a name, worthy of nothing from the table of the Children of Israel, the chosen of God.

Have you ever tried to teach someone a lesson by holding a mirror up in front of their face? Those of you who are parents, did you ever imitate your child's whiney tone of voice to show them how they sound? Have you ever spoken to someone the way they spoke to you in order to show them how harsh they were? That, I think is one result of

what Jesus is doing here. He's teaching a lesson. But that's not the central thing that's happening in this story. We'll come to that in a minute,

Who *are* the dogs in your life? Make no mistake, we all have them. The dogs in our lives are the people we prejudge – the people whose worth we judge as less than our own, simply because of some characteristic about them that we don't like, don't approve of, or simply don't understand. Perhaps it's people of different ethnic background than your own. Have you ever told a joke, or laughed at one, that made fun of someone else's ethnicity in a cruel or demeaning way? Of course you have. We all know jokes about African-Americans being dumb, Hispanics being lazy, Asians not being able to drive, etc. We've all heard them, we've probably told them, we've almost certainly laughed at them. How is that different from Jesus calling the Canaanite woman a dog? Aren't both dehumanizing?

How about people who are socially different than us? What about people who have a lot of tattoos, or piercings? You know the ones, they have partially shaved heads and what hair they have is colored a shade that appears nowhere in nature – what about them? Have we ever treated such a person differently than we would a friend? Or worse yet, what if they're dirty or homeless – what if they're openly gay or lesbian? Are they any different than the Canaanite woman in the story? What about Muslims? Especially those who live in Afghanistan or Iraq, what about them? Are they different than this dog of a woman from Canaan who came to Jesus?

“Dogs” are all around us. Anyone can be a “dog.” All we have to do is take away someone’s humanity and we can turn that person into a dog. Once someone has been reduced to the anonymity of dog status, then it is incredibly easy for us to treat them any way we want, without consequences. After all, they’re not like us, they’re not as good as we are, so why should we worry about treating them the way we’re treated?

I don’t think Jesus was ONLY trying to give us an object lesson here. I think what we see in this story is the truly human Jesus learning a lesson of His own from the Father in Heaven. Jesus’ mission up to this point had been to care for the children of Israel and to try to bring them to the fulfillment of their destiny as God’s chosen people. But because Jesus was fully human as well as fully divine. For the fully human Jesus, I think His ministry unfolded in front of Him, much as our own lives do. So, when Jesus treated this woman as a dog, as anonymous and sub-human, I can just hear the voice of the Father in His ear, “Whoa. Hold on just a minute. I *made* this one, just the same as I made all the others – including You. They are *all* My children. They are all worth the same to Me. Get to know her and see what you think.” So Jesus stops ignoring her and listens with those compassionate ears we’re used to, when she says, “Lord, even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” and He suddenly sees her for what she is, a child of God who is faithfully praying for help.

Jesus told the disciples to love their neighbors as themselves – to love each other even as Jesus loved them. I think it was *that* teaching that flooded through Jesus as He answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.”

My brothers and sisters, we live in an increasingly anonymous and fragmented world. More and more, every day we are being isolated from the rest of humanity. We travel in large, comfortable metal cocoons we call cars. No one can hear us when we call them names for cutting us off in traffic. We live in homes that are separated from other homes by acreage or fences. We speak to each other by text-message, or perhaps by telephone, but rarely face-to-face. We don't look into the eyes of people very often in this isolated world. Anonymity is the name of the game, and on top of that, we're constantly being told that we should fear or hate everyone who doesn't look or think the way we do. They're “Islamofascists” not people. They're illegal aliens, not people. They're queers, not people.

We can most easily start treating people as children of God when we get to know them as children of God. We can only begin to treat people with the love of neighbor that Jesus called for, when we get to know them as human beings first. The message I want you all to take home today is simple: it's all too easy to mistreat people whom we have dehumanized – it's harder to treat someone as a dog if we know his or her name, if we know about their family and their lives.

Next time you hear someone reduce an entire segment of the world's population into a stereotype or a punch line, or the next time you're tempted to do so yourself, remember that every one of those people has a name, a mother and a father, a life story that will almost certainly have similarities to your own. We *are* all different. There are bad Muslims, there are evil people who sneak across our borders, there are homosexuals whose activities are harmful to the community. But we are all fundamentally the same. God made everyone of us and loves each of us as we want to be loved; as cherished parts of a wonderful creation. Those who deserve to be feared and ostracized will prove it over time. But until you get to know them, you'll never know which ones are more like you and which ones are not.

Don't make anyone a dog. Assume they're children of God. Assume they deserve the same respect you do. If they don't, you'll know it. But more will than won't. We ARE all God's children. Act like it's so.

Amen.