

WHO LET THE DOGS IN?

Sermon, August 14, 2011

Text: Matthew 15:10-28

Now, be honest. How many of you think Jesus seemed a little rude in our Gospel reading? Did we actually read that Jesus called this 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 the movie **Ghostbusters**, and says, "OK, she's a dog." What's going on?

A man was getting ready to go to bed, when his wife told him he'd left the light on in the garden shed, which she could see from the bedroom window. But he said he hadn't been in the shed that day. He looked out himself, and could see there were two people in the shed, apparently stealing things. So he called the police, but the dispatcher told him no patrol cars were in his area, and there was no one else available at the moment to get out there to catch the thieves; he'd just have to wait. The man said "Okay," hung up the phone, counted to thirty, and called the police again. "Hello. I just called a minute ago because there were two people in my shed. Well, you don't have to worry about them now. I just shot them both." Four minutes later, three police cars were on the scene with an armed response unit, and they caught the burglars red-handed. One of the policemen said to the homeowner, "I thought you said you'd shot them!" The homeowner replied, "I thought you said there was no one available."

Sometimes you just need to do something drastic, even outlandish, to get someone's attention in order to address what really needs to be addressed. I believe Jesus is doing just that in our Gospel reading this morning ... doing something drastic, even outlandish, to get the disciples' attention in order to address something that really needed to be addressed. And what needed to be addressed are the racial biases and prejudices of His followers.

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 paternal Aunt Carol used to always say to my brothers and me; in fact, she still does, sometimes!*) Or, I can glare at my son or daughter and say with a scowl, "You crazy, mixed up kid." The exact same words, but a totally different message is being communicated by the tone and look. I'm convinced Jesus was engaging in a kind of *banter* with this woman, and He was doing so in order to get His disciples' attention. 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 is what makes a person dirty or clean. 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. As I was preparing this sermon I couldn't help but remember a little illustration which occurred while I was running the Newport 5-mile Pie Run last Thanksgiving (*actually, "running" is a generous term for my rather plodding pace that morning, but I digress*). It was about mile 2 that a perky young(er) woman ran up alongside me and engaged me in a bit of conversation. She seemed pleasant, maybe mid 40s, 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 gut, you know, all those things middle-aged guys tend to do in such situations ... and then she said, "I'm feeling better now, but when I woke this morning, I really felt like _____." I won't repeat what she felt like ... let's just say it was a rather nasty, vulgar and not exactly attractive metaphor. To me, it was almost as if she grew a five inch wart on her nose! Because of what came out of her mouth, she went from seeming pleasant to nasty, from seeming attractive to repulsive, from cute to crude. I mumbled back something like, "I, uh, hope you continue to feel better," and dropped my pace to my usual plod and let her run on ahead. Now, she could have been a very pleasant person, but to me, what came out of her mouth certainly didn't convey that impression.

Jesus makes clear that the bad things we say, the destructive and/or demeaning or vulgar attitudes we harbor in our hearts and let loose through our lips, *these* are far more damaging and polluting to us than what goes into our mouths. In short, Jesus says to His disciples that what we say, matters! And then, in the very next paragraph, Jesus lets loose with derogatory racial epithets? That seems ... inconsistent. No, I'm convinced Jesus is using the epithet "dog" like my Aunt Carol used the epithet "crazy mixed up kid" ... He's using it with a mock seriousness and a transparent irony, and I also think the text subtly communicates 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. Then this 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." This woman's daughter is suffering terribly, she tries to get Jesus' attention, and He acts like He doesn't hear. It seems Jesus is deliberately ignoring this woman. Well, I think He is doing this to test His disciples, to see what they will do in the face of Jesus' apparent rudeness. Do they understand what He's about? Do they understand His compassion for

everybody, including Gentiles and mothers with disturbed children? Do they get it? Will they challenge Him on this apparently rude behavior? Their response comes in verse 23, *"Send her away," they say. "She keeps crying out after us!"*

Just as an aside, note the "us." The "us" seems a little grandiose. She hasn't said anything to the disciples, has she? Who's she after? She's after Jesus ... but the followers of Jesus rather generously include themselves in Jesus' reputation. There's a little lesson here that bears noting, but in short we in the church need to remember people often come here seeking Jesus. They aren't necessarily coming here because we are all that attractive or engaging or smart or winsome; they are drawn to *Jesus*. And they are coming here 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 sometimes Jesus waits to see what we, His followers, 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 do the former rather than the latter.

They say to Jesus, *"She's bothering us, send her away."* And 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 very clear He has come for the whole world. He's not willing *any* should perish. But here Jesus appears to agree, He appears to echo their biases and prejudices, and it seems they almost expect Him to say, *"After all, I'm sent only to Israel, God's favorites. Of course I'll get rid of her. I have no time for the Gentile riffraff."* But He doesn't go quite that far. He *appears* to agree, but then He watches to see how they will respond. Will any of them dare to disagree? Will any of them stand up for this woman? 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; she's certainly taking it all in. She knows these followers of Jesus really don't want her around, that they would really like to be rid of her, yet she stays and she waits out the apparent silence and divine "aloofness" of Jesus ... because I think she catches what He is trying to do. She may even be a bit entertained by this! Like our homeowner who called the police and said "I shot them," Jesus is saying something really outlandish in order to snap His followers to attention. Verse 25: *"The woman came and knelt before him, 'Lord, help me!'"* The disciples are watching. The tension starts to build in them, 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. This is another human being, a person just like them. This is the cry of a desperate mother for a beloved daughter who is in physical and spiritual agony. Like any loving parent, she can feel her daughter's torments, her daughter's suffering, and she is desperate to have her daughter helped. And maybe they are beginning to think, "Could it possibly be God is better and bigger and more embracing than we thought?"

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."* The plain meaning of this was clear: The children were the Israelites. The dogs were the Gentiles, including this woman. Dogs in the Middle East were scavengers and garbage eaters (*not unlike my dog Solomon!*); they were considered unclean animals. Jesus is giving voice to their biases, and in doing so He is forcing the disciples to face themselves in the "mirror" of these statements. He was saying out loud exactly what they were all thinking in their hearts about this woman, that she was little more than an *animal*. He was showing them the cruelty of their presumptions; He is showing them *"This is what it would look and sound like if you actually followed your thoughts through and put them into words and treated people this way to their face."* It's one thing to have contempt for somebody behind their back; it's another thing to hear the ugliness of your cruel thoughts and feelings expressed out loud before a real human being. This is not some scavenging animal; this is a PERSON who needs help and salvation!

Just one more interesting thing to note: There are two Greek words that could be used for dogs, and Jesus uses the diminutive word, meaning *little doggie*. The word Jesus uses is for a little puppy, not a big moose of a dog like my Solomon. What doesn't translate from the Greek 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, which literally might be rendered, *"Yes, Lord, but even the little doggies get the little 'crumb-ies' from their masters' table."* She comes 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. There is an element of playfulness about her, as if she's bantering with Jesus. Jesus then turns to face this 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! Your prayers are answered!"* And we're told her daughter was healed that very hour.

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?"* To love each person God brings into our lives, this is the will of God for us; this is the way of Christ. Or, maybe some of us here are where this woman is today. You've cried out to Jesus, but He seems silent, He seems aloof, He seems indifferent, and maybe even His people have seemed downright hostile toward you. But keep going with all the grace and grit and faith and optimism and even humor you can muster, and you can bank on this ... the Lord will be good and loving and even gregarious in His grace toward you.