



Pentecost 16 – Proper 18 (B)

Nourishment

[RCL] Isaiah 35:4-7a; Psalm 146; James 2:1-10, [11-13], 14-17; Mark 7:24-37

Note: During the 2024 Season after Pentecost, Sermons That Work will use Track 2 readings for sermons and Bible studies. Please consult our archives for many additional Track 1 resources from prior years.

It's a story so common that it could almost be passed off as unremarkable: a woman whose young daughter was ill had come to Jesus and bowed down at his feet. How many times have we heard a story about someone coming to be healed by Jesus?

Mark goes to great lengths to tell us that she wasn't a Jew. She was a Gentile, Mark says, and more than that, she was the worst kind of Gentile: A Syrophenician Gentile, meaning that her ancestors were Canaanites and Moabites—historic enemies of the Jewish people. The woman begged Jesus to heal her daughter. Once again, how many times have we heard Jesus going into the wrong neighborhoods, breaking bread with the wrong kinds of people, healing on the wrong day of the week?

But then, Jesus does something we're not expecting; he says to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

You heard that right: Jesus called the woman a dog.

This kind of language rightly makes us uncomfortable when utilized by people in our everyday lives. But it is especially upsetting when this kind of language comes from none other than Jesus the Messiah: God incarnate! It is for this reason that whenever there is discomfort with the Biblical text, there is always a gaggle of well-meaning preachers and teachers waiting in the wings with their bottles of white-out and their homiletical rotary sanders, ready to rush in and smooth out the rough edges and paint over anything judged to be objectionable.

Some will say that Jesus doesn't call the woman a dog, he calls her a puppy—a term of endearment—and that the word wasn't as insulting back then as it is now. If that explanation sounds silly to you, that's because it *is* silly. Jesus said what he said, and it meant then what it means now.

So, if the text really does say what it appears to say, and God is not callous or cruel, what are we to make of his response to this desperate woman? As the Letter of James reminds us, words do matter, so what about these words?

Some choose to criticize Jesus for giving in to the bigotries of his own day, others simply preach on the Old Testament or the Epistle, avoiding the Gospel in the way that a five-year-old avoids peas when they manage to appear on his plate. Neither option is particularly appealing because at the end of the day, the Gospel is Good News, and Jesus isn't clumsy with words—especially when they're addressed to people at the margins of society.

When we come to Scripture, and especially when we come to troublesome passages like this one, we are called to be generous with the text. In the same way that Jesus shows us grace, perhaps we should give Jesus a little grace—and perhaps even the benefit of the doubt.

One of the things the New Testament reveals about Jesus is that he meets people where they are—both physically and linguistically. He uses agricultural metaphors to speak to an agricultural society, fishing metaphors to speak to fishermen, and even metaphors from the slave-master relationship to speak of justice in a society riddled with social injustice.

We also know that Jesus is not slow to choose metaphors from women's experiences to proclaim the gospel as well. In this passage in particular, we know two things about the woman from the start: She is a Canaanite, which means that she is decidedly *not* Jewish; and she is a parent. She has come because her daughter is unwell, and she is begging Jesus for help.

Jesus says to her, “It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.”

The woman is a parent, and Jesus adopts that parenting language in his response. “Would it be responsible parenting,” he asks rhetorically, “for a mother to take her children's food and give it to the family pet? Would you do such a thing to your own daughter?” We could replace the reference to canines with any other method of food disposal — a cat, an incinerator, a wastebasket — and the metaphor would still hold its meaning. But replace children with anything else, denoting any less responsibility on the part of the parent, and the metaphor falls apart.

Jesus has already ventured outside of Galilee and outside of Israel. Tyre and Sidon are nearby, in what would be present-day Lebanon. They're not Jewish communities, and Jesus is keenly aware of this fact. He and his disciples have left Galilee and Israel in search of some peace and quiet, where the crowds would not follow, and where Jesus could pray and teach and commune with his disciples.

In responding to the woman utilizing parenting imagery, Jesus is saying that parents often have to make hard choices. As much as we love our pets, children come first.

Notice that the woman does not quibble with Jesus' decision to stick to his priorities, nor does she take exception to his language. That's because the metaphor is about the necessary care and attention and resources required by parenting, and not Jesus making a slur against her race or sex.

In fact, if this were about the woman's race or sex, then her response wouldn't make any sense. She says, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

In other words, the pets are part of the family, too, even if in a secondary way. The woman recognizes that, because Jesus is who he is, this is not a question of limited resources. Even a crumb's worth of healing from Jesus will mean the world to her and her child. When heard with even a modicum of generosity, this story speaks an important word of Good News that the Church desperately needs to hear.

In the Book of Common Prayer, the Rite One liturgy for Holy Eucharist includes the hallowed "Prayer of Humble Access," which reads in part, "We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table," followed by that all important "but... thou art the same Lord whose property is always to have mercy..." This prayer puts us shoulder-to-shoulder with the Canaanite woman, as we confess both our present reality: we are unworthy, and yet the Good News of the Gospel is that ours is a God of mercy and grace, who desires nothing more than to nourish our souls and bodies with his own.

We come to the table as dogs: unworthy and on bended knee. And yet we are fed the bread of life and the cup of salvation, not because of anything we have done, but because the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is the same God we meet in the face of Jesus Christ: a God of mercy and love and grace.

Amen.

***The Reverend Dr. Marshall Jolly** is rector of St. Thaddeus Episcopal Church and president of its parish day school, Mead Hall, in Aiken, South Carolina. He holds degrees in theology and other stuff from Emory University and Transylvania University, and he is currently practicing the spiritual discipline of humility by learning to play golf. He and his wife are supervised by a fluffy little nine-pound Himalayan cat with a huge personality, Hambrick.*