

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor
9/10/06

Mark 7:24-31 (NRSV)

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[26] Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.

[27] He said 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."

[28] But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

[29] Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go--the demon has left your daughter." [30] So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

[31] Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis.

DOGS

I love dogs. I have two powerful and stubborn dogs upon which I lavish my affection and try to control. But, sometimes I'm reminded that I have welcomed carnivorous animals into my home.

Somebody once said, and I think it's true, that dogs are really wolves in dog's clothing. In a moment instinct can kick in, and you lose control. For example, a pretty Greyhound comes into view, and your canine companion can become a pulling at the leash, drooling mess.

(Of course, come to think of it, if a pretty girl walks down the street some men can become a drooling mess as well ... but that's another sermon.)

Today we're talking about dogs as you can see by the title of my sermon, "When the Gospel Goes to the Dogs." And today at least we're talking about dogs in a negative way.

We're talking about aggressive pit bulls and those dangerous, lean scavengers who aggressively patrol the city dump. In other words we're talking about those animals that everyone fears. We're talking about dangerous creatures that desperately need to be controlled by animal control.

WOLVES IN PEOPLE CLOTHING

Well, that's not exactly true either. I've led you astray. This sermon is not really about dogs. It's about people, people who act like dogs. It's a sermon about people who are really wolves in people clothing.

You know who I'm talking about. I'm talking about terrorists. I'm talking about those people who strap a backpack full of explosives to their body and then detonate it in the middle of a crowd. I'm talking about those people who hijack planes and use them as weapons. I'm talking about people who kill innocent civilians and call it the will of God.

They're wolves in people clothing. We've heard way too much about people like that lately, haven't we?

But, the big question is how do we respond to those people? How do we respond to the people who live in Tyre and Sidon?

That's the question in our day.
And that was the question in Jesus' day as well.

THE ENEMIES OF TYRE

In order to understand the impact of our lesson you need to understand the animosity that existed between the Jews and the people who live in the region of Tyre. The city was known for its wickedness, and her king even claimed to be God (Ezekiel 28:1 ff.). Jezebel came from this part of the world, perhaps the most infamous woman in the Old Testament.

Tyre rejoiced when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC. Without Israel's competition trade and profits would increase. The jeers and the treachery did not go unnoticed. The taunts of the people of Tyre are recorded in Scripture, and the people of Israel longed for the time when Tyre would get her comeuppance for her evil ways.

And it's in this place that our lesson for today takes place. Jesus deliberately went into the region of Tyre. Mark wants us to note that Jesus is moving beyond the boundaries of the accepted world into foreign territory.

That's why the woman in our lesson for today is identified as a Syrophenician woman. Well, what kind of woman would she be? It's like saying that we went to Mexico and met a Mexican woman. Who else would we meet in Mexico? And who else would Jesus meet in Tyre and Sidon except a Syrophenician woman?

Mark wants his readers to be very aware that Jesus had once again gone beyond the boundaries, the boundaries of his nation and the boundaries of what was considered proper. Once again Jesus is mixing with those who are ritually impure and theologically suspect.

BREAD AND DOGS

Now at first blush, Jesus does not seem to be all that interested in extending his ministry beyond the confines of Judea and Galilee. The Scripture tells us that when he entered that region, he didn't want anyone to know that he was there. Perhaps he was looking to get away from the huge crowds that were following him and get a little rest. Whatever the reason, it didn't work. They sought and found Jesus even when he was in Gentile country.

In particular there was this Syrophenician woman. The Scripture tells us that her daughter was demon possessed. She begged Jesus to heal her daughter. And what did Jesus do? Did he show compassion on this foreign woman? That would make for a nice simple, straightforward tale. That's how we would like the story to go. But, it didn't happen that way.

Jesus, reflecting the attitude of Jews toward the people of that region said, “It isn’t right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.”

In other words, Jesus makes it plain that he is under no obligation to heal this woman’s daughter. She’s from the wrong side of the tracks. She’s one of those dogs who rejoiced when Israel was in distress. She’s of the lineage of Jezebel. It wouldn’t be right to even talk to her ... much less heal her daughter.

One preacher put it this way,
“It would have been difficult to imagine a presence more symbolically problematic for a Jewish wisdom teacher than that of a Syrophenician woman. Her identity carried all the negative stereotypes (pagan, foreign, female, sexually suspect) -- and, to make matters worse, she was, by the rules of her time, inappropriately forward, and had a demon-possessed daughter to boot!”

It’s almost amusing to read the commentators who attempt to lessen the impact of this shocking statement by Jesus as he calls this woman a dog. William Barclay suggested that the word translated “dog” in this passage really refers to “puppies” and that Jesus possibly said this “tongue in cheek” with a “twinkle” in his eye.

I can understand why the commentators would want to try and downplay what Jesus said. It is disturbing to think that Jesus would call anyone a dog ... even a cute puppy dog. But, I would suggest to you that the response of Jesus is entirely in line with the main point of this passage.

THE GAP BETWEEN JEW AND GENTILE

This story is meant to highlight the difference between Jew and Gentile. His comment reflects the reality of a deeply rooted prejudice in ancient society. Mark is saying in story form what Paul said in prose to some Gentile believers in his letter to the Ephesians.

Paul wrote,

“... remember that you were ... without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.” (Ephesians 2:11-12)

Paul’s description fits the people of Tyre. The people of Tyre were lost. They did not worship the one true God. They had no hope for a Messiah. The promises of God were not for them or so it seemed.

And yet, the very fact that Jesus was there ... on the wrong side of the border where no self respecting Jew would go, having a conversation with this woman in public (which no self respecting man would do) gives us a hint that something new is about to happen.

SPIRITUAL GEOGRAPHY

In studying this passage one commentator said that the journey of Jesus is so roundabout that this “cannot have referred to an actual journey.” He said, “It is best understood as an attempt to construct an itinerary for Jesus in a non-Jewish area, a construction attempted by one whose knowledge of that part of the eastern Mediterranean world is less than exact.”

I have some maps that plot the route taken by Jesus according to this passage, and it’s easy to see why this particular commentator might make a statement like this. Jesus is literally going in circles for more than a hundred miles ... on foot! Was Jesus really such a bad navigator? Or maybe there was a reason why he kept going in circles and crossing the border.

We often say that the world is going to the dogs, and that the terrorists are winning. What are we to do with these people who still live in Tyre and Sidon? What should we do with these people who rejoice in our misfortune and losses?

Should we call a dog a dog and be done with it? Should we say that “those people” will never change and abandon all hope of ever working with them? Should we tell them to stay on their side of the border, and we’ll stay on ours? What would Jesus have us do?

Perhaps the gospel is using geography to teach us theology. Mark knew where Tyre and Sidon were. And he also knew where Jesus was as well. Jesus was always crossing boundaries. And where Jesus went often said a lot about his message and mission. There was a wideness to God's mercy that was breathtaking and scandalous.

I think he still wants us to cross the border. I think Jesus still wants us to dream of a world where the borders between people and countries are not so well defined. I think Jesus still wants us to dream of a future that is different from what all the doomsday experts are predicting. I think Jesus wants to imagine a world that is subject to the detours demanded by the unpredictable geography of God's grace.

In Jesus' day no self respecting Jew would even risk being contaminated by traveling through the unclean world of those foreign dogs in Tyre and Sidon. The words on Jesus' lips about Gentiles being dogs were the conventional wisdom of the time. And they weren't talking about puppy dogs. They were talking about pit bulls.

CRUMBS UNDER THE TABLE

But, the answer of the woman shows that the conventional wisdom needed to be challenged. She replied, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

Jesus in his harsh reply to this woman was saying that the first priority was to provide food for the children (that is teach his disciples) and not to allow pets to interrupt the family meal.

In our family there is one hard and fast rule. Do not feed the dogs from the dinner table. Nothing is more obnoxious than a begging dog. But, sometimes something is dropped, and the family pet becomes a helpful scavenger.

The woman didn't try to argue about her status in God's kingdom. Instead, using Jesus' choice of imagery, she pointed out that she was willing to be considered an interruption as long as she could receive God's healing for her daughter.

Even the family dog can become a member of the family. (For example, during hurricane Katrina, people risked their life rather than leaving the family pet behind. Those dogs were a part of the family.)

And Jesus pronounced this Gentile dog to be a member of the family as well. Jesus saw her reply as a sign of faith. And so he replied to the woman, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.”

The woman went home and found her daughter healed. That day the gospel really had gone to the dogs.

Ironically, many Jews (the children who had primary claim on the spiritual food of the kingdom) would lose God’s spiritual healing because they rejected Jesus . . . while many Gentiles, whom the Jews rejected, would find healing because they recognized God’s salvation in Jesus.

A NEW DAY

A young student came to his rabbi and asked, “Rabbi, how can we tell exactly the moment when night has ended and the day has begun? Is it when it is so light that we can no longer distinguish a star in the morning sky?”

The rabbi replied, “No, my son, this is not how we can tell.”
The student persisted, “Then how can we tell.”

And the rabbi replied, “We know that night has ended and the day has begun when we look into the face of the stranger next to us and recognize that stranger to be our brother or sister. Until that moment, we have spent our lives in the darkness, but at that moment we have awakened into the light of day.”

Jesus looked into the eyes of a Syrophenician woman and saw not a dog to be dismissed but a sister who needed help. And he responded by showing her love and mercy.

For Gentile believers who read this story years later, this detour across the border became a main highway, a beacon of hope. It was a story that reminded them that God’s grace does not stop at the border, that there is hope

not only for the Jews but also for the Gentiles as well. This was the day that the gospel went to the dogs, and this is also the day that the gospel came to us as well.

A DETOUR ON THE ROAD OF LIFE

I know that there are many here today who feel like they've come to a detour on the road of life. There are young people who are bored with school and don't know what to do with their life.

There are people who find their job to be a dead end and wish that they had chosen to do something else with their life. There are people here today who have suffered great loss in their lives that has made everywhere they go seem like nowhere.

There are quite a few of us like the woman in our lesson for today. We are without hope and desperate for salvation.

I have good news for you. Jesus is willing to make a detour from his busy schedule and meet you where you are and how you are. In our hour of need, in the time of darkness, there is a person of faith beside us in the most unlikely of places.

No matter how the road of our life twists and turns, God's grace always goes with us. We might feel like a dog and we might even act like a dog, but the scraps of God's grace will still fall from the table. And they will be more than enough to feed us in our time of need.

Jesus took the long way around to get to the Sea of Galilee and there he was sidetracked by a stranger, a Syrophenician woman from Tyre. At least she was once a stranger, far from God's people and God's promises. But, because Jesus took a detour, the apostle Paul could later write about her and us,

“So, then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God ... “(Ephesians 2:19)

A MASTER CARPENTER

A man suddenly and unexpectedly was fired from his job. Bitter and crushed by the experience he turned to alcohol for consolation. His life went from bad to worse.

Finally, he took the long road back to health. He met a person in AA who enjoyed sculpture. He tried it, and he liked it. He became a wood carver whose wildlife carvings made him famous.

Today his life is full and rewarding. He has by the grace of God, turned tragedy into something beautiful ... even as he turns crude blocks of wood into beautiful birds and animals.

I think this is an example of what God can do with us as well.

Sometimes the master carver is God ... whittling our lives through the twists and turns and detours that we take. Sometimes it seems like we are going in circles, but if we turn our lives over to Him, he can make us into something beautiful.

Today I ask that God will give us the faith of a Syrophenician woman. Even the crumbs from God's table can provide a banquet fit for a king.

Amen.

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