

## “Dogfood”

Matthew 15.21-28

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You may have noticed that the title for this morning’s sermon is “Dogfood.” Yes, that’s right, you haven’t misunderstood me – I’m going to be talking about Purina and Iams and Science Diet this morning!

Well, not quite.

But still, you may be thinking that I’ve lost it. I mean, here we are, hoping and expecting that God will speak to us in our hearts this morning, and the preacher wants to talk about *dogfood*?

Well, yes, I do. Because the kind of dogfood I’ll be talking about this morning . . . it matters. A lot.

“Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon.” That’s how this story begins. “Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon.” Now this is a wonderful example of why we simply have to understand some geography if we’re going to understand the stories in the Bible. If we want to understand what these scriptures are all about, we have to do a little homework. In this case, we have to learn a little about geography. “Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon.” That’s important. It *matters* that this story takes place in the district of Tyre and Sidon. Because the district of Tyre and Sidon was *not* a part of Israel. It was not *then*, and it is not *now* – today, Tyre and Sidon are in the country we call Lebanon. Jesus has left Israel; he has left the region around the Sea of Galilee where he has been ministering up to this point; he has gone north and west, towards the coast of the Mediterranean Sea; he has entered a different country. There was no clear line of demarcation back then; there was no fence, no gate, no border patrol – but, nonetheless, when Jesus heads for the district of Tyre and Sidon, he heads for a different country. He enters a foreign land. This is not his homeland. Jesus was a Jew. He has left the land of the Jews behind. He has entered Gentile territory.

Now this is also a wonderful example of why, if we’re going to understand the stories in the Bible, we also have to learn some *history*. Jews and Gentiles – in that era, in the era in which Jesus lived and these stories were written down - those were loaded concepts. It was, to a certain extent, like the difference between “white” and “black” in this country in the days before the civil rights movement. The Jews of that era understood themselves to be God’s chosen people. They were the one nation, out of all the nations in the world, that had been chosen by God. God had brought them out of slavery in the land of Egypt, led them through a terribly difficult 40-year sojourn in the desert wilderness, had given them ten commandments and a whole host of community rules and laws about ritual matters, had

brought them into a land flowing with milk and honey, and had established them as God's holy people. As far as the Jews of that era were concerned, God had done that with *nobody else*. No other nation was as worthy in God's eyes as was the nation of Israel. The natural tendency was for Jews to look down upon their non-Jewish neighbors. They understood themselves to be God's people in a world of nations filled with people who, in their mind, worshiped gods who were not worthy of the name "God." So when Jesus left his Jewish homeland and traveled into Gentile country, he was entering the world of the second-class citizens.

And he comes upon a Canaanite woman. Again, it's important to know some history. That word "Canaanite" is as loaded a word as the words "Tyre," "Sidon," "Jew," and "Gentile." The Canaanites were a group of people who had lived in the region we now call "Israel" for hundreds and hundreds of years before the Israelites ever showed up. When the Israelites came knocking at the door of the land that we call "Israel," the Canaanites were already living there! And if you want to know what happened to the Canaanites, well, go read the books of Joshua and Judges. It wasn't pretty. The Canaanites were among Israel's first enemies.

So Jesus leaves his Jewish homeland, crosses the border into a foreign land, a land of what his people considered to be second-class citizens, and he finds himself being approached by a woman who is descended from Israel's ancient enemies. Now if this isn't a set-up for something dramatic, I don't know what is!

The woman comes to Jesus and says, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David." Did you notice that she called him "Lord?" Now this is a great example of why, if we're going to understand the stories in the Bible, we also have to look at the larger context in which this story occurs. Right before this story, Matthew tells a story about Jesus having a dispute with the Pharisees and the scribes, the religious leaders of Israel. It seems that the Jewish religious leaders don't think that Jesus is religious enough. They wouldn't be caught dead calling Jesus "Lord." But then, in the very next story in Matthew's gospel, we meet this foreign, Gentile, Canaanite woman, who calls Jesus "Lord." The contrast between these Jewish leaders and this foreign, Gentile, Canaanite woman couldn't be more striking. And then – and then! – she goes on to call Jesus "Son of David." David was the king of Israel whose armies, a thousand years earlier, slaughtered many of Israel's enemies. He would hardly have been remembered fondly by the Canaanites! And, what's more, many of the Jews of that era were hoping and expecting that some descendant of David would come back, take up political power in Jerusalem, establish armies, and kick out of Israel all the people whom Israel didn't want there, just the way David had done a thousand years earlier. If the Canaanites had been looking for a hero, it certainly wouldn't have been David, or one of his descendants.

Do you begin to grasp the rich texture of this story? There is absolutely no reason in the world why this woman should look at Jesus and think highly of him. He's a foreigner; he's a Jew; he's descended from one of her people's historic enemies; he could be a potential threat to all non-Jewish people living in or around the land of Israel. And this Canaanite woman comes running up to Jesus, begs him for mercy, calls him "Lord" and "Son of David." The only reason she would do that – the *only* reason she would do that – is if she could somehow sense that this was no ordinary Jewish male who was descended from David, but rather . . . the Savior of the *world*.

All she wants is for her daughter to be healed. It's a simple request; it's very, very similar to all sorts of other healing stories we find in the gospels. People have been bringing to Jesus all kinds of people who were sick or lame or possessed with demons, and he's been curing them, one after another after another. This request is no different. What *is* different is the person making the request. A foreigner. A Gentile. A Canaanite. Jesus has crossed the border . . . and will he do for *those* people what he does for *his* people?

Initially, Jesus doesn't reply. The disciples do; they're right there with Jesus. Remember, the twelve disciples were all Jewish, just like Jesus was. The disciples don't want to hear it. They don't want anything to do with this woman. She's making a fuss. She's too loud. "Send her away, Jesus." "Get rid of her, Jesus." "We don't want to listen to her, Jesus."

What Jesus says next is the *second* hardest element to understand in this whole story. (We haven't got to the *hardest* part yet!) Jesus says, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." It's a simple statement in which Jesus declares, maybe to the disciples, maybe to the woman, maybe to himself, what he understands his mission to be. "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." We have trouble with that. We have trouble with the notion that Jesus was sent only to one particular group of people. It all has to do with Israel's place in God's drama of the salvation of the whole human race. If you really want to understand why Jesus says that, go read Paul's letter to the Romans, chapters 9 to 11. Basically, Israel is the fulcrum point in God's drama of salvation for the whole human race. God chose Israel, yes, and God chose Israel *first*. And because of the manner in which Israel was chosen, and the manner in which Israel responded to that choosing, the whole rest of the world gets brought along. This is way too complicated to explain right now; it's all explained in Romans 9 to 11; it's a sermon (or two, or three!) for another day. Simply put: right here, in the middle of Matthew's gospel, Jesus is indeed focused on Israel, on bringing Israel back to God. That's why, when Jesus sends the disciples out to do ministry in his name, back in chapter 10, he sends the disciples only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And it's why, at the very end of the gospel, after Jesus has been betrayed, and executed, and raised, Jesus sends his disciples out to all the nations – all the Gentiles. Something changes, later on. But here, in the middle of Matthew's gospel, Jesus is focused on Israel. So he says, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

The woman is persistent. She has already called him "Lord;" she has already called him "Son of David"; now, she gets down on her knees, and worships him. Remember the story, at the beginning of the gospel, of the magi who come and kneel down before the baby Jesus? This woman does the same thing. She recognizes, like they did, just who Jesus is. Again, the contrast is striking. The religious leaders in Israel don't know who he is! They don't buy it. They don't believe it. They think he's a troublemaker, and a nuisance. But this woman - this foreign, Gentile, Canaanite woman - recognizes Jesus for who he is. She gets down on her knees, and she worships him. "Lord," she begs, "help me."

And here comes *the* hardest element to understand in this story. Here's where the "dogfood" comes in. Jesus looks down at this kneeling woman and says, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." It sounds so heartless. It sounds so insulting. It sounds so derogatory. But you have to remember: the Jews would have considered this woman, and all her people, second-class citizens.

We never do that, do we? We never look down on other groups of people, do we? We always look at other people - people whose skin color is different than ours, people who speak a different language than we do, people who were born in other countries and came here to live, people who don't have access to the kinds of goods and services that we have, people who don't have the same level of education that we do, people who live a different lifestyle than the lifestyle we live, people who don't have as much money at their disposal as we do – we always look at those kinds of people as equals before God, don't we? We always see them as beloved children of God, don't we? We always see them as people for whom Christ lived and died, don't we? We don't have any prejudices, do we? We never look at other people as second-class citizens, do we? No, we're better than that, aren't we? Aren't we? Please, somebody, tell me, we never do that.

Jesus looks at this woman and says something that any Jew of that era might have said. The Jews understood themselves to be God's chosen people. They understood themselves to be better, in God's eyes, than the rest of the world. And what this story that Matthew is telling is demonstrating so clearly is that those people who understood themselves to be so good, so wise, so holy – like those scribes and Pharisees that Jesus left just before coming here - those religious leaders who don't think that Jesus is religious enough – well, just compare those people with this woman, who calls Jesus "Lord," and "Son of David," and gets down on her knees and worships him. Sometimes, it takes somebody from the *outside* to demonstrate just how far from the mark those people who think they're at the *inside* really are.

"Yes, Lord," she says, "yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." This woman knows who the Master is. This woman knows that the crumbs that might fall from the table of this Master to people like her are *food* worth eating. There is no better food than the food that this Master can provide, and this woman knows it. Even if the Jews might consider her and her people to be like *dogs* . . . she recognizes the Master when she sees him . . . and she knows good *food* when she sees it.

My, what she could teach those scribes and Pharisees.

"Woman," says Jesus, "great is your faith. Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

May we, my friends, *never* find ourselves in the position of putting down whole groups of people because of our prejudices and our biases that are a result of our own sinfulness. May we, my friends, have the boldness to be able to look upon the world not as *we* might choose to see the world, but rather as *God* might choose to see the world. May we, my friends, have the ability to recognize that there are people in this world of ours whom our culture might try to exclude, but whom God chooses to *include*. May we, my friends, have the capacity to understand that there might be people "out there" whose faith in God and whose ability to recognize Jesus for who he really is . . . might even be greater than ours.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit . . . amen.

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