

“Even the Dogs Eat the Crumbs...”

Sermon prepared by the Rev. Douglas Clark for September 6, 2015 – Ordinary 23

9:00 a.m. - Communion by Intinction

First Congregational Church, Haddam, CT

“In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, diversity; in all things, charity”

From there Jesus set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. 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.” But she answered him, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” Then he said to her, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.” So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone. --- Mark 7:24-30 (NRSV)

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly. --- Matthew 15:21-28 (NRSV)

I was somewhat surprised earlier this week when I used online Bible software to search for the phrase “the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Appears only twice in the entire Bible, both times in Matthew's Gospel:

- Jesus sends the twelve apostles out as missionaries, and instructs them to go only to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (10:6).
- Jesus says of himself, in response to the persistent entreaties of the Canaanite woman, that he was sent only to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (15:24).
- When the Pharisees criticized Jesus for his table fellowship with “tax collectors and sinners,” he answered, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick” (Matthew 9:12).

Some important things to keep in mind about Jesus' social location and his self-understanding:

- First-century Palestinian Judaism
 - strict boundaries between Jews and non-Jews (Gentiles): Jews sometimes referred to Gentiles as “dogs”
 - for Jews, dogs were scavengers, unclean animals; for Gentiles, dogs were often house pets, treated almost like family members.
 - Roman occupation
 - Widespread poverty
- Jesus understood that his mission was all about renewing and restoring Israel – although today's story is set in a largely Gentile region
- Teaching and healing especially among the marginalized: the “least of these,” the “lost sheep,” those who needed a “physician”
- It was only after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection that his followers extended his ministry “to all nations.”
- During his ministry, Jesus did not intentionally reach out to Gentiles. Matthew notes two occasions on which Gentiles

approached Jesus in search of healing: the Roman centurion who entreated Jesus to heal his servant; and the Canaanite woman who begged Jesus to heal her “little daughter.” In both instances, these Gentiles who approach Jesus are desperately seeking healing: one for a beloved servant, the other for a beloved child.

In the story involving the Roman military commander, Jesus' initial response was an “expression of hesitation.”¹ The Greek sentence structure in the text indicates a question, ‘Am I to go and cure him?’² “Do you want me to go and cure him?” I hear in Jesus' words not only an “expression of hesitation,” but perhaps an undercurrent of skepticism as well. “You (a Roman military commander) want *me* (a Jewish peasant) to heal your servant??” It was only when the centurion put himself under Jesus' authority that Jesus changed his mind and healed the servant.

Similarly in today's story. The Gentile woman who accosts Jesus is probably from a higher social status. Whether it is her status or her desperation that compels her to approach him, Jesus is not only *hesitant* to help her, he's also firmly *resistant* to helping her. In Matthew's version of the story, he at first ignores her. When he finally takes the time to listen to her, and she begs him to heal her daughter, he retorts with an ethnic insult: “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

One of the principles of biblical interpretation that I've tried to follow throughout my ministry is to begin with what we call the “plain sense” of the text. Jesus in this episode does not directly call the Gentile woman a “dog,” but the plain sense of his words is clear. It's a little bit like a white American saying to a black American, “You people,” or even worse.

Another aspect to the “plain sense” of this text is that this unnamed Gentile woman has acted in several transgressive ways. In the words of Ched Myers, one of my favorite biblical interpreters, “her solicitation is an affront to the honor status of Jesus: no woman, and especially a Gentile, unknown and unrelated to this Jew, would have dared invade his privacy at home to seek a favor.”³

As I ponder the “plain sense” of Jesus' words, I am taken aback that even with this affront to his honor status, he used such a common ethnic insult. This is not the “gentle Jesus meek and mild” of popular culture. And yet, knowing what I do about Jesus' social location, about centuries of hostility between Jews and Gentiles, it should not surprise me that Jesus, who we affirm was not only “fully divine,” but also “fully human,” would share the human attitudes of his Jewish community to the Gentile world.

1 Anna Case-Winters, *Matthew*, 128.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., 203.

Again in the words of Ched Myers, this story “both assumes and reflects the ethnic, cultural, and socio-political history between Jews and their Gentile neighbors.”⁴

The story doesn't stop there, however. Even more surprising than Jesus' initial insult is his ultimate response to the woman's clever twist on his words. “Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.” Jesus is usually the victor in verbal contests like this one. Here, however, the tables are turned (so to speak). She gets the best of him. He changes his mind and heals her daughter.

Why would Jesus, who was fully divine, change his mind? Remember the story of Jonah and the whale? Remember how the reluctant Jonah called upon the people of Nineveh to repent, and how they actually repented? Think of this verse about God's response to the people's repentance: “When God saw what [the Ninevites] did, how they turned from their evil ways, **God changed his mind** about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it” (Jonah 3:10).

If God, who is fully divine, can change God's mind; and if Jesus, who is fully divine and fully human, can change his mind, then there's hope for the rest of us. In our continuing quest to become fully human, in our lifelong yearning to love one another even as Jesus has loved us, there's hope for us. We too can change our minds—even when it comes to some of our cherished beliefs and practices. Even those of us who are native-born children, or adopted children, of this “land of steady habits,” can change our minds. Once we recognize that it's the right thing to do, we can change our minds. Even I, crusty curmudgeon that I sometimes tend to be, can change my mind.

I think it is increasingly the case in today's world that many churches like our church—and including our church—are going to have to change their minds about how to be church. Along with declining membership and decreasing financial resources, we're facing the rise of what are being called “the nones and the dones.” (that's N-O-N-E-S and not N-U-N-S).

The “nones” are those, particularly young adults in their twenties and thirties, who have no religious affiliation; many of these so-called “nones” also self-identify as spiritual but not religious.

The “dones” are those whose children have gone through Sunday school and confirmation and youth groups, but now have gone away to college or life on their own; so the parents of these young adults don't have the same reasons for attending church that they did when their kids were younger. The “dones” are done with church, though not necessarily with spirituality.

It's not that so many people in our communities today are hostile toward the church (though some are, given how poorly they've been treated by various

4 Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 204.

fundamentalist brands of Christianity). It's rather that many Americans today see the church as not particularly relevant to their spiritual lives or their spiritual needs. And yet, I continue to believe that the story and the person of Jesus have just as much vitality and validity for us in the twenty-first century as they did for people in the first century. Given the kinds of changes that have taken place in today's religious and spiritual landscape, we are going to need the persistence of the Roman centurion and the perseverance of the Gentile woman as we seek to discern who God is calling us to be and to become.

Let us remember that Jesus answered the entreaties of the Roman centurion and the Gentile woman—with amazing healing. Let us be confident that God will answer the persistent prayers of God's people here in Haddam for the current and future well-being of our beloved church. Thanks and praise be to God! Amen.