

“Going to the Dogs”
A Sermon Preached at
Grace-Trinity Community Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota
August 17, 2008 - the Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time
and Based on Isaiah 56:1-8 and Matthew 15:10-28
by the Rev. Scott O. Stapleton

Welcome to the dog days of summer—so called because once upon a time, the hottest, most humid days of the year, which is to say, now, occurred when the Dog Star, Sirius, appeared just before or at the same time as the sun. It was an unhappy time, it was said. “The seas boiled, wine turned sour, dogs grew mad, and all creatures became languid, causing to man burning fevers, hysterics, and phrensies.” The words come from John Henry Brady’s *Clavis Calendaria, or, a Compendious Analysis of the Calendar Illustrated with Ecclesiastical, Historical, and Classical Anecdotes*, and first published in London in 1813. This is a happy coincidence for us, if you must know, because, following this morning’s worship service, we’ll be filling in our own church calendar, and we hope to illustrate it with inspirational, recreational, and irresistible events of our choosing, or at least ones that do not give rise to burning fevers, hysterics, etc.

Strange it is, then, that our gospel lesson for today, which ought to aid us in this exercise, has itself gone to the dogs. It has. Today’s gospel lesson is one of the most extraordinary in all the Bible, certainly in the New Testament, for it shows Jesus in a most unflattering light, so much so that we could be excused for thinking he was suffering a case of summer-time phrensy.

You’ve just heard the tale: a Canaanite woman, which is to say, someone not of the chosen race, tracked Jesus down and began shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” He refused. He met her pleas with stony silence. His disciples wanted the woman sent away. Jesus merely said, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” End of the matter. Jesus was not the Savior of the world; he was the Savior of the house of Israel, period. But the woman wouldn’t let go. She came and *knelt* before him, saying, in a not so loud voice, “Lord, help me.” Jesus insulted her. “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to *the dogs*.” Dogs in this saying are not examples of loyalty and faithfulness. They are examples of unrestrained appetites, and as such they are metaphors for the Gentiles who have no knowledge of the Torah and thus, no knowledge of how to curb their appetites through obedient service to God. The Canaanite woman in Jesus’ understanding is nothing more than a lost soul who deserves her fate.

Ah, but this woman, she is more than that. There is good reason she is enshrined in holy writ. For she, unlike any other gospel petitioner, has challenged Jesus on his own turf, and she has come away with the prize! Think of it: an olympics for athletes competing in the Hearts Most Attuned to God event. Jesus, you’d think, is the runaway favorite. But it’s the Canaanite woman who takes the gold, and it’s Jesus who finishes second with

the silver. And the disciples, we hope, will eventually get around to claiming the bronze. (They're still trying to figure out how to get into their newfangled wet suits!)

The Canaanite woman holds fast to what Jesus, so far, is steadfastly refusing to acknowledge, namely, that the mercy of God extends to all who...well, to all who what? What is it that the Canaanite woman is a model for?

Here, I cannot help but pause. There is a problem here, at least there is one if we are not careful. For on one side we've got stubborn Jesus, holding fast to what we would have thought were all the things someone who has unshakable faith in God should hold fast to. And yet, somehow, it is these very things that have kept him from extending the mercy of God to this woman and her daughter. On the other side, we've got the Canaanite woman, who knows nothing of what it means to keep God's sabbath, to choose the things that please God, and to hold fast to his covenant (these requirements come from the book of the prophet Isaiah which, wouldn't you know, is our Old Testament lesson for today). The woman cannot know these things because she is not part of the covenant. She's a Canaanite woman. They worship Baal over there in Canaan—Baal, the god of appetites. And yet, somehow she has learned about Jesus, and she even knows that he is the Son of David and worthy of being addressed as Lord. But is that all it takes to please God? What does the woman know that Jesus cannot see?

She knows that she is in need, and that the God-man, Jesus, can help her if he so chooses, and that her need and his redemption are enough. Lord, help me. Help me. Help me, help me, help me, help ME, help ME, help ME, HELP ME, HELP ME, HELP ME! She does not let go!

Whoa! Wait a minute, Jesus says. It is not fair to take the children's food and give it to *the dogs*.

Yes, Lord, yet even *the dogs* eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table!

Oh my! A new kind of silence! How long do you suppose it was before the shock of recognition completely laid hold of Jesus? He had just been explaining to his disciples, Look, it's not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person; it's what comes out of our hearts that corrupts us. It's our evil intentions, our false witnessing, our *slandering* that defiles a person. Forget eating with unwashed hands. Look to your own heart; see what treasures therein you cling to.

Amen, said the Canaanite woman. Look to your heart, Jesus. And is not the great-est treasure this: "to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke"? That's from Isaiah, too. Isaiah 58:6. What a great book Isaiah is. I daresay Jesus knew it by heart. And what the Canaanite woman did was to remind Jesus of its claim on him. Yes, Lord, fasting is pleasing to God. But the fast God chooses is this: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke and to let the oppressed go free.

An unadorned plea for help. For various reasons, I was feeling down this past week. And then along came Henny, my angel of mercy. I have a favor to ask, she said, *sotto voce*. Could you go with me to the bus station to pick up some boxes of Marko's. I don't think I can do it by myself. Presto! All my doldrums vanished. I was back on track, back extending the mercy of God to where it ought to go—to whomever was in

need and appealing for help. I have never limited my ministry to the household of Israel, but I have most certainly failed to extend it as far as God intends. A common enough problem, I trust. And, to redeem my soul, God sends me...what? Canaanite women? Henny's? People in need—yes, that's it. And they are my redemption, and, to a certain extent, I am theirs as well. It's a mutual admiration society we have going, and I thank God for it.

So, what should we all take away from this shaggy dog story? The gold prize goes to: the mercy of the Lord is very great indeed. It encompasses all who are in need, all who cry to the Lord for help. The silver goes to: those who recognize this truth and do it are worthy of praise. Also, they themselves will be redeemed. Bronze: Give thanks for hungry dogs. They bring us Gentiles the gospel of peace.

Thanks be to God. Amen.