

August 20, 2017

Matthew 15:21-28: ***“A Dog’s Life”***

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

If you start looking around the internet about begging dogs, you will come across a multitude of articles on how to get your dog to stop begging. It is one of the most common discipline issues that dog owners face. I suppose that one might say that it is a side effect of loving a dog too much. Anyway, there are all kinds of rules that you are suppose to observe such as: do not give food to a begging dog; ignore a begging dog; don't feel sorry for your dog; use discipline consistently; be patient. All sounds great unless you have a dog "who's got your number," so to speak. This is the rare dog who can see that your stern "no" is not really reflective of what you will finally do in the end. This is the dog that will not so easily stop begging. This is the dog who firmly believes that you will give him the food on the table.

In our Gospel lesson, we are brought to a Canaanite woman who begged Jesus like a little dog. It is of first importance to understand what it meant that she was "a Canaanite." If we were to somehow divide up the dog world into classes, she would have been at the bottom. As Jeffrey A. Gibbs comments: [she was] "a member of the ancient and idolatrous enemies of God's people in the promised land. A female Canaanite (and her daughter) may be the least likely of people to elicit mercy from the Jewish teacher and the most unlikely to acknowledge his true identity." Allow me to take it one step further. If the Israelites had done what God commanded them to do 1500 years earlier - completely wipe them out all of the Canaanites - this woman and her daughter would not have existed. Among the dogs, these are no ordinary dogs.

It is, therefore, shocking to hear the mother say in our text, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David! My daughter is terribly demon-possessed!" Does this woman really have faith? Is it even possible that this could be the case, that she could know the Lord's judgments against her own people, even feel such judgment in her own demon-possessed daughter, and still firmly believe that the Lord will do good things for her? Will Jesus even listen? And Matthew records, "But he [Jesus] did not answer her a word. And when his disciples had approached, they began to ask him, saying, 'Send her away, because she is crying after us.'"

Evidently, the silence of Jesus will not keep her from crying out; thereby, magnifying the real possibility that she knows that he is the Son of God and that she is a believer. The disciples want Jesus to do something about her, and apparently, they want him to heal the daughter so that the mother will stop crying out and leave them alone. Jesus says to the disciples, "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

The response is designed to reveal something wonderful. You see, if Jesus does something for this Canaanite woman and her daughter, they are counted as lost sheep of Israel; that is, they who are outside of Israel are considered to be a part of Israel. What Jesus will do or not do will define whether he has come only for Israelites, or for even those in other nations - to die for the world. This is really the question that is being raised: Is the Savior only the Savior of Israelites, or will he save others and count them as lost sheep? Even more, what finally defines a true Israelite? As we shall see in the Canaanite woman, a true Israelite is not one who is of a bloodline, but is one by faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God!

Things get a little tense in our text. Matthew goes on to record, “But she came and knelt before him saying, ‘Lord, help me.’ And he [Jesus] answered, ‘It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.’” It is easy to read this text and simply conclude, “Wow! Jesus sure was mean to this Canaanite woman! Where’s the love?” Lest we forget, sometimes love is not exactly what we may think it is. Jesus is doing great things with this woman as he often does with us.

Consider it in this way: this Canaanite woman is crying out for Jesus to save. Her crying out has raised the question as to whether she really knows and believes. Can it be so? It is here that the Lord tests her for her own sake, for the disciples, and for all of us who are reading this text today. He doesn’t do this to be cruel to her, but to grow her faith into a faith that will persevere through everything, and will never let go even in the face of death. If she were not a believer, she would have given up and walked away. Instead, she hold onto the promises regardless of the words of Jesus. And with that, the disciples really know that a Canaanite can be a child of God. In the face of being called a “dog” - and she acknowledges that she is just that - she nevertheless will not let go of her belief that the Messiah will save her and her daughter. Matthew records her response: “‘Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.’ Then Jesus answered her, ‘O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.’ And her daughter was healed instantly.”

Jesus has grown and strengthened her faith into a faith that is so strong that it holds onto the Lord even when it seems as if the Lord is an enemy. What a wonderful gift for her and for all of us. Here we learn to embrace every hardship knowing and believing that the Lord really loves us. He is teaching us begging dogs to look for the food from the Master’s hand even when it seems that the last thing he will do is give us something from his table. This is truly what **A Dog’s Life** is all about! And, make no mistake about it, we are all dogs who deserve to be outside of the kingdom because of our rebellion.

And what about the question: Is Jesus only the Savior of Israelites, or will he save others and count them as lost sheep? Will he save us also, making us into begging dogs that we may receive crumbs? Will he create and preserve in us faith to hold onto his promises no matter what? In Isaiah 49:6, the Father says of the Son, “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” What a great joy it is to know that the cross and empty tomb are for dogs like us! What a wonderful thing it is that we may know that our sins are forgiven! What an amazing thing it is to be given such insight to be able to hear the harsh law of “no” and yet know and believe that the heart of our master says “yes.” And in this hardship, our faith is a faith that is for a lifetime and fulfilled in the forever!

In 1546, Martin Luther died. Two days before that, he wrote these last words on a scrap of paper: “We are beggars. This is true.” Rev. Paul Rydecki comments:

For all that God accomplished through him, Luther never thought highly of himself, especially before God, never thought for a moment that he deserved anything good from God. Instead, he praised God’s grace in Christ Jesus. And he maintained that beggar-attitude up to his dying day.

One has to have an attitude like that, a humble, self-abasing, beggar-attitude before God in order to appreciate today's Gospel about the Canaanite woman who was compared by Jesus to a little beggar-dog. You can only appreciate this text if you start from the position of beggar, convicted sinner, eternal death row inmate, with no entitlement mentality, no illusion that you have a right to God's help, or to God's attention, or even to God's concern—no matter how sincere you may be, no matter how downtrodden, no matter how worthy.

In other words, this text is well beyond the grasp of the world, because it preaches against the very things the world praises and it praises the very things the world hates. The wisdom of the world is cast down and the foolishness of God is exalted. This is a precious text against our pride, a text that praises Spirit-worked humility and faith, and that, as always, highlights the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Indeed! **A Dog's Life!** It isn't the type of life that this unbelieving world would want. But, from the perspective of the Christian who knows and believes in Jesus - "A dog never had it so good!"

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott