

Going to the Dogs

A. Stephen Van Kuiken
North Congregational U.C.C.
Columbus, OH
September 29, 2024

Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.
—Canaanite woman to Jesus, Matthew 15:27

Ancient Witness: Matthew 15:21-28

Who cannot sympathize with the woman in today's story? What parent's heart does not ache hearing this mother's plea for help for her daughter? Some of the Jews had been calling this rabbi, Jesus, the new Messiah, the new David, come to liberate them from Roman occupation and to restore their nation to greatness. The thing is, she's not Jewish; she's a Gentile. But this is her daughter. She'll try anything to save her daughter, relieve her child's misery. She will exhaust every resource, spend her last penny, try every possible cure. What parent wouldn't?

And so the text says that this mother "started shouting." And she is yelling and screaming, "have mercy on me, my Lord, Son of David, my daughter is tormented by a demon." She is desperate.

Only there's a problem. The woman is not Jewish. She's Canaanite, indigenous to the area. Any serious student of scripture will know why. The Jewish people had immigrated generations previously, conquering and colonizing the area. Much like the Europeans who conquered and colonized North America. They saw this land with its vast resources—flowing with milk and honey—as given to them by God, and it was their "manifest destiny." The native inhabitants were an inconvenience that must be dealt with, dispensed with and, if necessary, eliminated. Brutally and shamelessly eliminated. They took the land, took the resources for their own. For after all, they were "God's chosen."

Like the indigenous people of North America, the Canaanites looked different. Probably, they had darker skin, and they were viewed with derision, seen as less-than-human, as dirty, as unclean, as contaminants. Those who mingled or intermarried with them were themselves ostracized and rejected. They were viewed as inferior, uncivilized, stupid and barbaric. They were seen as savages. This is ironic, since they experienced barbarism and savagery at the hands of these invaders.

And so they kept their distance. Years of animosity had deeply ingrained this prejudice and racism into the fabric of their culture. And like many societies, they lived in separation and segregation.

But this mother, in her desperation, persisted. Becoming a nuisance was her last resort. In our story the disciples say, "Send her away. She keeps shouting at us." The audacity! She should have better manners. She should know her place. Perhaps she does, but a parent will sacrifice anything for their child, even their dignity.

So Jesus tries to send her away discretely. “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” he says. He’s only concerned with his fellow Jews, he tells her.

But still, she persists. She’s tenacious. This is her child, her precious child, this courageous, magnificent mother will not take “no” for an answer. “Help me,” she demands.

So then Jesus replies: “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

What? Is this Jesus? Is this the same person, the one who would come to embody the love of God, the compassion of God, for all people and all things?

Now I need to stop here and point out that to call someone a “dog” in Jesus’ day was perhaps the supreme insult. We’re not talking about someone’s beloved and pampered pet here. As in the undeveloped places of the world, think: wild, scrawny, stray, scavenging, expendable, throw-away. This is a harsh thing to say.

Miguel de la Torre wrote,

The Canaanites were seen by the Jews in very much the same way people of color are today seen by some Euro Americans, as an inferior people, no better than dogs...How many times have people of the margins heard similar remarks from Euro Americans? Jobs, educational opportunities, and social services are for “real” Americans. Instead of taking food away from the children of hard-working “Americans” to throw to the dogs, “they” should just go back to where they came from. (Reading the Bible from the Margins, p.34)

And so what a disappointing comment from Jesus! And it is impossible to comprehend if we do not allow Jesus to be the human being that he was, as the church has done now for generations. The church has transformed Jesus into an unapproachable deity and has lost track of him as the spiritual pilgrim, the teacher, the prophet, the human being that he was. And like any other person, he made mistakes, was evolving and was learning throughout his entire life. This passage would shock us because the church has imposed a false kind of perfection upon Jesus. Me? I’m part of a progressive, alternative Christianity that many are unaware even exists. We don’t need to worship Jesus to allow him to help us realize our connection with the Divine Presence.

And so this incredible, dignified and valiant mother responds, gently, but with the full force of love behind it. “Yes, my lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master’s table.”

Zing!

And Jesus, to his credit, says: “Good point! I stand corrected. You’re right.” If we must talk about perfection or maturity (in the New Testament the two are synonymous), perhaps it has to do with being correctable, non-defensive, willing to change, to learn and to grow.

And so Jesus was able to learn, but not just that. He was willing to be instructed by the lowest, the most inferior, the dregs of this world—the “dogs.”

And so we need to ask, what can the “dogs” teach us? Things we cannot know or truly understand for ourselves. Those of us who are part of the dominant culture in one of the most dominant nations of the world, we cannot know what it’s like
to be ordered around and regarded as mere property,
to do the lowest, most menial and humiliating jobs,
to be looked upon as scum, less-than-human to be utterly vulnerable and invisible,
to live in desperation and survive day-to-day.

When we are willing to be taught by those on the margins, we approach them not as objects of pity, not condescendingly to help them with our charity. No, we relate as equals, in true mutuality, with humility and openness to learn.

The truly spiritual person learns not just from scholars and consultants, but from the “dogs” in our lives, from the voices of suffering in the world. When we hear this voice within ourselves or from others, we can either become defensive, callous, hardened and protected, or it can open us up, soften our heart and expand our soul.

For a few years I did social work in Cincinnati while I was also leading a small inner city congregation. And I worked with federal inmates at a halfway house. They were there as part of the terms of having time off their sentences. Some had been in prison for over 20 years. One of the conditions was that they needed to find employment or risk being sent back to prison to serve the rest of their time. In the state of our recent economy, this was extremely challenging. And so these men had to deal with the stigma and struggle rebuilding their lives.

Many of these men worked as day laborers through the growing temp agency industry in warehouses, manufacturing and janitorial work. Staffing agencies are an emerging phenomenon in the new economy, the new reality. Each day over 4.5 millions people are employed in this way. Unlike permanent employees, day laborers have no rights and protections—no unemployment benefits if they are laid off, no health or dental benefits, no pension, no grievance process—the work is utterly at the whim of the employer.

Actually, since the worker is employed by the temp agency, the employer is insulated. One of the employers that used staffing agencies was the Cincinnati Reds. Some of us from the local Interfaith Worker Center picketed some of their games as fans walked into the stadium. I knew the process intimately. Some of my men had to show up to the temp agency 2 to 4 hours before the shift began. This meant that they were often out for 11 to 12 hours but only were paid for 6 to 7 hours of work. Sometimes they were turned away with no work at all. They were herded onto buses (they weren’t allowed to take their own car). By the way, they had to also pay for this “transportation fee.” And they would pick up the peanut shells and trash that the fans had left at the game the night before. Some used power washers, but had to rent the company’s boots if they wanted to keep their feet dry.

These workers were paid significantly less than full time employees, though some of these savings were absorbed by the staffing agencies, who took their cut. But what I noticed was how these men were treated as mere bodies, as commodities, often cruelly by their supervisors. The men had little recourse by to take it. These were the “dogs.”

And so, I have to tell you, that sometimes these hardened inmates—former drug dealers, former embezzlers, and the like—became my teachers. These “dogs.”

In the mid-90’s when I was in Minnesota, I worked with a group called People of Faith, founded by a friend and former union organizer and Presbyterian pastor in Brooklyn, Dave Dyson. We also connected with a guy named Charlie Kernaghan, who was part of the National Labor Committee. Charlie went around documenting the abuses of the then new global economy to raise the consciousness of America.

And we advocated for 14, 15 and 16 year old girls who worked in sweatshops in Honduras for 20 to 30 cents an hour under inhumane conditions—doors chained shut, no bathroom breaks, forced to take birth control pills. Young girls were the preferred workers, because they were the most compliant. They were “dogs.” So we launched campaigns to raise awareness and transform these conditions. We held events, spoke with executives from The Gap, pamphleted stores. Kathy Lee Gifford cried when we targeted her clothing line. Like companies that use staffing agencies, the first response of these multinational corporations was to disavow any responsibility because these workers weren’t officially their employees. But eventually we obtained major concessions.

About this time, a group of us brought in a young man named Craig Kielburger to an event in Minneapolis. When Craig was only 12 years old, he saw an article in a newspaper about another 12 year old in Pakistan named Iqbal Masih. Iqbal was sold into servitude when he was 4 years old and like countless other children was chained to a loom to make carpets. Millions of children have their childhoods stolen from them as they are put to work in factories making soccer balls, clothing and the like for our consumption. The small and nimble fingers of children make them good at this. Iqbal organized labor reforms and was therefore brutally murdered. These “dogs.” Nothing more than “dogs.”

And so Kielburger listened and learned. And he organized other school children and that grew to an international organization called Save The Children.

And today, there are those desperate families who come to our southern border, or who one from crushing poverty and horrific conditions—legally—from countries like Haiti to work in towns like Springfield, Ohio only to be demonized as “dogs” for political gain.

And so what can we learn from the “dogs” of our world? I suspect that, in part, we learn that every human being is precious and has dignity and value. And this dignity is inherent. It is not bestowed by anybody and therefore cannot be taken away.

Perhaps we learn that the worth we think we have—because we are part of a tribe, a nation or a group, because we have achieved certain things or behave in a certain way—is not the worth that we really have, our inherent worth.

They can elicit a loving impulse, our best selves, to emerge, and help us view ourselves and others with compassion. They can teach us that the world is often unfair, unjust and mean. And so we have work to do—to change it, to transform it.

We can learn, as Jesus learned, to find our identity in the “least of these” in our world, and that compassion draws no distinction and knows no bounds.

(NOTE: The spoken sermon, also available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)