

Even the Dogs

Anyone who has been involved with Bible Study over the years has almost surely encountered the numerous stories of the Israeli Patriarchs which showed them as flawed people—admirable in many ways, but still having the tendency of all humanity to falter in their righteousness and obedience to God’s ways. The Hebrew Scriptures portray the complete story of each of them from Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, and their descendents through the years including King David and his family. Despite God’s active guiding and participation in their lives, we also see the times and places where they are not the perfect models of righteousness. It is all there. We are told of the good, the bad and the ugly as the saying goes. The portrayals of those Jesus gathered and called to continue his mission of redemption also often appear in some not so flattering ways—confused and afraid—lacking comprehension and having little faith. The passage we read this morning from Mark’s gospel is similar to the Hebrew Scriptures in that respect as it is the presentation of a less than admirable exchange —except this is Jesus whose actions are recorded—Jesus acting in a way which is totally alien to our image of him. The story of Jesus’ encounter with the Syrophenician woman is not a story many people include among their favorites of Jesus. It is a story which makes us uncomfortable as we read of Jesus’ response to this woman. This story shows us Jesus initially refusing a desperate mother’s plea to cleanse her daughter of an unclean spirit—and in the process of this refusal, calls them “dogs”. Even when Jesus finally grants her request for the healing, we are left a little stunned because this is not the compassionate Jesus Mark has prepared us to expect thus far in the narration. Unlike John’s gospel which contains extensive and expansive discourses on the meaning of what Jesus says and does, Mark is all about the minimalistic recording of the actions of Jesus. Each chapter contains multiple encounters all compressed together with no consistent sense of chronological time or distance between what is recorded. The lectionary lifts up discrete episodes for us, but in doing so the context is often lost. In order to understand this difficult story we need to first place it within the larger story which Mark is relating. In Mark’s gospel Jesus is rather like the energizer bunny—almost always on the go—a non-stop urgency fills this narrative—Jesus is presented as being on a mission for the Father which he only has a limited time to accomplish. By the time we come to today’s story in Chapter 7, Jesus has traveled to many towns and villages in Galilee proclaiming that the Kingdom of God is come. He is casting out unclean spirits. He is healing the lame, the blind and the sick. Large crowds are gathering wherever he goes. And in Mark’s gospel, the success of Jesus’ ministry has already put him in conflict with the Scribes and Pharisees—who have already begun plotting to destroy him. In the 6th Chapter, Mark reports that the demands of the ministry have become so great that Jesus and his disciples do not even have time to eat! Jesus attempts to get away for a little R and R by going across the Sea of Galilee to the other side—going to a deserted place. When they arrive, they find the place is not deserted at all, but a crowd of over 5,000 people are awaiting their arrival. Jesus, seeing the crowd, has compassion on them even though they have disrupted his plans for rest and renewal. He spends the day teaching them and even feeds them from the few loaves of bread and fish on hand. Jesus sends the disciples back across the Sea of Galilee while he goes up on the mountain side to pray. The disciples encounter a strong wind which impedes their progress, the disciples in the boat see him come walking toward them across the water and they are frightened. Jesus joins them in the boat,

the winds cease and the disciples, although astonished, do not understand his identity. When they are again ashore, the crowds have come and brought their sick to him for healing; he continues to go into the villages and marketplaces to teach and heal. Mark has bookended the feeding of the 5,000 with numerous healings in this one chapter. Last week the confrontation between Jesus, the Pharisees and scribes who came down from Jerusalem seeking evidence against Jesus' ministry was the focus of the text. This confrontation over ritual purity leads to Jesus declaring these representatives of the religious establishment hypocrites for their emphasis on human standards, not divine commandments. When Jesus and the disciples are alone, it seems that the disciples have not understood the point Jesus has made. So Jesus tries to make sure the disciples understand by restating the criticism of the purity rituals. The source of defilement comes from inside the human heart and not from outside contamination, and ritual purity is not what most concerns God. This is the situation as today's passage begins. Jesus is aware of what his mission is. His job responsibilities, so to speak, include reconciling the entirety of broken humanity with the creator of the universe. The task list for this might be a tad daunting. Every day Jesus has teaching to do, and those endless healings. The twelve person staff he has selected to assist in the mission does not really seem to get what they are supposed to be doing. Jesus keeps spending more time explaining things to them with only small indications that they comprehend his mission or their role. Certainly, they don't seem to be actively doing things to aid in the mission. Jesus seeks and hopes to find a moment or two of quiet by going anonymously to someone's house away from Galilee to the region of Tyre. That he leaves Galilee and goes to Tyre is significant because that is a place where Gentiles—the term for any who are not Jewish—reside. He is seeking respite from his hectic pace. But instead he finds that news of his ministry has reached beyond those of Galilee and as our passage says—"he could not escape notice." In fact, before he can hardly take a deep breath a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet." But instead of the compassion which Jesus felt when he saw the crowd of Jewish Galileans gathered to greet him, Mark reports a different response. After making sure that it is understood that this woman is a Gentile, Mark records her plea to Jesus that a demon be cast out from her daughter. Jesus has come to redeem the world, but he is working on a plan that does this through the chosen people—the children of Abraham. You could say that Jesus' vision for redemption places a hierarchy—an order of priority—to what can and should be done first. The text explicitly tells us Jesus was trying to avoid notice and here comes this woman who has approached him defying both the ethnic and social boundaries of the time to make her request. It isn't that Jesus hasn't already healed Gentiles as he has traveled the countryside it's more about the context. He's seeking rest, and according to the norms of the day, no Jewish man, especially one with a religious task or vocation expected to be approached by a woman, least of all a Gentile woman. It just was not done. "Jesus said to her, 'Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.'" Some commentaries describe this as Jesus "caught with his compassion down". It is certainly not a compassionate response, but a rebuke to her for her approach to him. In the historical and cultural context of the time it was quite a put down. Dogs were not pets but ran in scavenging packs and were considered by Jewish tradition to be unclean. They were not on the list of clean animals and they had contact and ate things which were defined as unclean. Because of these behaviors, "dogs" was an ethnic slur used by Jews for Gentiles. The

comparison is strengthened as the woman is described as bowing—on her knees begging—scavenging for a miracle—she thus resembles a dog. But again the woman defies expectations. She responds: “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” The woman does not argue with Jesus or dispute his rebuke for her approach. She also does not accept the insult nor does she go away. Instead, she adopts the label of dog from Jesus’ rebuke and then creatively yet forcefully extends the metaphor in such a way that she and her daughter are included within it. With these words the Gentile woman, an outsider, on her own, bowed down before Jesus ceases to look like a scavenging dog and instead embodies the type of faithful discipleship that Jesus asks of his disciples. Through her persistence she reveals her loyalty, compassion, trust, and willingness to humiliate herself on behalf of her daughter. The woman ministers to Jesus by her faith. Her actions have the effect of enabling Jesus to see the situation in a different way. Here is a non-disciple who understands his metaphor without asking for an explanation. Here is a non-Jew who has persistent faith. Here is a Gentile “dog” who is esteemed among the least in Jewish culture, but who models the values of the kingdom Jesus is bringing. It seems ironic that this story appears immediately—to use Mark’s favorite term—after Jesus has criticized the Pharisees for their adoption of human traditions instead of God’s commandments. It seems Jesus begins this encounter assuming the kingdom is for the Jews now and only sometime in the future will Gentiles be included. Jesus leaves the encounter committed to sharing the benefits of God’s Kingdom with the Gentiles even now. Jesus’ second response is, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.’ And the woman went home and found the child lying on the bed, the demon gone.” Mark tells us that Jesus immediately acts on this understanding making two more stops in Gentile territory before returning to Galilee. He heals a man in the Decapolis and then he demonstrates that God’s table is for all people by feeding 4000 Gentiles by breaking seven loaves of bread in the desert. This story addresses the issue of every “outsider”. It gives all the promise that they have a place at the table in God’s kingdom where God offers them not leftover crumbs but abundant loaves of grace. This story also challenges all who regard themselves as “insiders” with the stern admonition that the grace of God is not an exclusive privilege that can be possessed and not shared. This story calls us to acknowledge the sinfulness of the boundaries we draw that divide people into “children” and “dogs.” Our dividing lines are numerous and our vocabulary of exclusion is expansive and insidious—idle rich, lazy poor, godless secularist, ignorant fundamentalist, bleeding heart liberal, and heartless conservative are just a few of the commonly heard examples of the lines we have drawn to divide us. This story dares us to dismantle these divisions, to unlearn the language, vocabulary and behavior of exclusion, and to seek God’s Kingdom where all are valued. The path to God’s Kingdom “points us forever outward, beyond all partiality towards the universal vision of God’s redemptive plan in which even those we would call “dogs” or worse are accepted and included. In God’s Kingdom we all belong, we are all children of the One who creates, loves, and redeems. Thanks be to God.