

Table Scraps for Dogs

Mark 7:24-30

I never had a dog growing up or, for that matter, any pets, other than a turtle when I was ten (which lasted about a week) and, later, two gerbils who escaped their cage and retired as lunch for the neighbors' cat. By the time I headed off to college, I acquired my own cat, Smelly, which I left back home with my mother, and then found a stray dog that I tried to house in my freshman dorm room, which nearly resulted in my expulsion. Otherwise, for most of my adult years, I have lived a pet-free life—an orderly, hygienic, and allergy-free existence.

However, when I married Wendy nine years ago, my life radically and seismically changed. My monk-like solitary existence was no more. When she and her daughters and her myriad and sundry pets took residence in my seaside hermitage (otherwise known as the parsonage), I was introduced to a world I thought limited to zoos or barnyards. Some of you were genuinely concerned. You thought to yourself, how will Paul “OCD” Hayes ever adapt to such a chaotic menagerie? Will we lose the innocent, mindless delight of his humor once he steps into a mound of carelessly placed canine residue, or when he has to deal every morning with the litter box of not one, but *three* cats? Those were legitimate, veritable concerns.

However, as I've come to see, some lives are destined for conversion. I, who had lived so sheltered from the domains of God's other begotten children, was ready for redemption from my lifelong reluctance to share habitable space with four-legged critters. Not

only did I come to take care of Wendy's family pets, little by little I came to embrace them as my own. My hygienic hypersensitivity gave way to a new philosophy: "live with a dog, live like a dog." By the time Bling and Fusco arrived on the scene, I let them sit on the furniture, sleep on the bed, and share the food I eat in ways I could not have imagined a decade earlier. Some would fear I have so lowered my hygienic standards in canine-human contact that I've nearly turned into a dog myself, short of squatting on the lawn. Now Wendy doesn't even hesitate to include me in her Facebook postings about her puppies. I have come to live a dog's life, with whiskers and floppy ears to match!

Actually, in spite of my cheeky jesting, until I had dogs of my own, I couldn't read this particular passage from Mark without being taken aback by Jesus' words, which come across as derogatory and verbally insulting to the woman who came to him for help. I'm certainly not alone. Commentators down through the ages have struggled with Jesus' seemingly petulant, if not callous, tone toward a Gentile woman—not treating her with any measure of dignity and only altering his response once she fired back with a sharp retort: "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Until she won Jesus over by appealing to his humanitarian treatment of mongrels, allowing them (as most people did) to scavenge for table scraps, many have assumed that Jesus was uncharacteristically bigoted in his initial assessment of this woman, revealing, apparently, his home-grown Jewish contempt for non-Jews.

Frankly, this story doesn't sit well with many readers because Jesus shouldn't be exhibiting any form of racial prejudice anymore

than we should want God to show favoritism toward certain ethnicities. Our traditional image of Christ doesn't include him relying on cultural stereotypes, or harsh demeaning rhetoric, even though (we'd have to admit) these are values more reflective of our time than his. Still, we're not comfortable with him treating any woman as second-class, in effect, calling her a "bitch," if I may be so graphic.

So there's disconnect in this story between the Jesus we love and adore and the one depicted here. If he were campaigning for public office, this would be one of those dreaded moments when candidates speak their minds and the media jumps all over them. Had Jesus been scrutinized by today's standards, he may have been viewed a hero for ultimately sacrificing his own life to save the world, but what his critics would remember most is the day he said something stupid while on the campaign trail. It's that kind of story.

Lest, we think we're enlightened enough to never think or utter a similar word, be reminded of all the times we say something regrettable, politically incorrect, or stupid, or hurtful, or completely inconsistent with our expressed values and somebody notices and calls us on it. We can be shamed by our own words, which could have been what happened to Jesus here, as some have suggested. The Syrophenecian woman pushed back at Jesus after being referred to as a dog. Maybe that was why this story was remembered and passed along—because it illustrated the point that even Jesus had a human side.

That said, it is noteworthy that Jesus was outside of his familiar home environment when all of this occurred. He wasn't in Galilee or

Judea, his normal whereabouts. Instead, he was in the region of Tyre and Sidon—along the Mediterranean coast not too far from Beirut in modern day Lebanon, just north of the Israeli-Lebanese border. In Jesus’ day, this was Gentile territory, a port city founded by the Phoenicians, with a cosmopolitan mixture of ethnicities and cultures.

The woman in this story is described as Syrophoenician, meaning that she was represented all who dwelled there from the Phoenicians to the neighboring Syrians. In today’s narrative, her face could be seen in the refugees fleeing Syria and seeking safety and asylum in Europe; except here, the woman was seeking safety for her child, who was battling a demon burdening her soul and psyche. We have no idea what was really going on, but we can imagine this desperate mother’s deep-seated fear and worry about the welfare of her suffering daughter, perhaps that her life was in jeopardy. A person would have to be heartless not to want to help in some way.

This is why Jesus’ behavior seems so strange and uncharacteristic. Why didn’t he instantly embrace her and respond to her pain? Why didn’t he show some compassion, avoiding the easy stereotypes and callousness? Why did it matter that she was Gentile and he was a Jew? Why does it *ever* matter to anyone who or where a suffering person comes from when they are hurting and in need of help?

But then, we have to remember that, in Jesus’ time, some Jews (particularly those who were devout) segregated themselves from Gentiles as much as they could—expressing their devotion and piety by remaining “pure” and “undefiled” from the larger world around them. Their view of God is what placed these “holy boundaries”

between cultures, religions, ethnicities, races, and classes. That's what insular religion does. Piety in that narrow context produces prejudice, as much as anything good. It projects upon God the justification for bigotry of all types. It often creates social monsters of judgment toward anyone outside of the in-group—who's faithful, who is not; who is favored and who is not. Such piety is used and abused to shield people from having to view others as equals, let alone worthy of love and grace. Most of all, insular religion fosters the impression that the only thing God cares about is for people to be morally strict and hygienically pure. Why? To mix it up with "dogs" won't purify the "dog"; it only defiles "good and righteous" people, who lower their standards where they end up looking and smelling like a dog. As they say, "live with a dog, live like a dog."

It's not a coincidence that if you look at the larger context of this chapter, Mark has set this story in the midst of Jesus addressing what truly defiles people. However, Jesus turns the table on the "people of God." It isn't the food one eats or avoids; it isn't the offerings you make or don't make. It isn't about washing your hands, or head, or feet, or touching or avoiding anything unclean. All that "righteous," hygienic religious behavior to avoid being defiled doesn't determine the fate and destiny of human beings. What defiles people in the eyes of God is what they say and what they think and what they do to harm others, especially if it's rooted in evil intentions.

Read the words of Jesus immediately preceding this story: "fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person." In my experience in human

life, that list is a great equalizer. I've never known a living soul who comes out smelling clean by these moral standards. Moral hygiene notwithstanding, we all have dirt on us and likely cast more stink around than we would like to admit.

So, in Jesus' verbiage, we're all like this Syrophoenician woman—every one of us. Jews or Gentiles, from Galilee, Judea, Tyre, or wherever life finds us—we're all like dogs scrounging for table scraps to feed our desperate souls. No one is truly righteous and able to punitively judge another with contempt.

To make this point clear, and with all things being equal in human terms, Jesus then healed the woman's daughter, commending her faith and making no distinction between what he felt called to do for his kinfolk in Israel and what he'd do for strangers. That's exactly how the nascent church embraced its radical mission proclaiming the gospel from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria and to the ends of the world. The great epiphany for the church was to discover that, in Jesus' interpretation of the law—of what's morally right and what's wrong—there is no place for insular religion; God makes no distinction between Jews and Gentiles, which is always a radical paradigm shift for anyone relying on borders and boundaries and harsh immigration policies. As Paul would phrase it, “there is no distinction made between Jew or Gentle, male or female, slave or free, for we are all one in Christ Jesus.” Which is to say, God is a true dog-lover, in whatever way this might be interpreted.

I don't want to leave the impression, though, that somehow we are all equal only on the level of the least common denominator, i.e., in the end we're all like dogs, basically creatures which stereotypically

scavenge upon the earth. To leave this impression is hardly inspirational and redeeming—at least to those who don't think very highly of dogs.

Admittedly, that was me in my past life. In my pre-Wendy years, I would have maintained a protective hygienic distance between the canine and human realms, assuming that being like a dog would be an insult to me as a person. Over the past several years, though, I've discovered something different, which is to say, on some levels it just might be a step up if we could be like our puppies.

I needed to experience a conversion of sorts in order to realize this. Why? Because it takes a dog-lover to grasp it. One cannot do it if you have no experience with or enjoyment of dogs because there's a built-in bias caused by emotional distance. It's like insular religion. If you don't live with a dog, you're more likely to be afraid of them.

However, that changes when you become a dog-lover. You realize there doesn't need to be a separation of souls. Dogs are just like children. There's a trustful acceptance and unconditional love that a dog expresses that, frankly, many adult humans will not consistently meet. There's an uncomplicated joy and persistent hopefulness that my mutts, Bling and Fusco, reveal each day that is contagious and uplifting to my own spirit and soul. They do so much to make me love them and share my life with them that I am emotionally related to them like a parent to a child, a best friend to another. I am as devoted to them as they are to me. What this means is that I cannot, and will not, be dog-less for the rest of my life—a true conversion for a pet-less ascetic. And as I've said before, a dog (D-O-

G) is a mirror image of God (G-O-D), which is a very high estimation and value one discovers in sharing life with a beloved pet.

So, you see, sharing table scraps with dogs isn't really offensive or disgusting at all; it's simply sharing a life together as kindred spirits. For me, that's come to be a good thing—both in the home and in the heart of humankind. For without those ties that bind us, we might not appreciate as fully the love we share with God.

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