

Is Someone Having a Bad Day?

[Text - Matthew 15:21-28]

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August 17, 2014

A Lutheran minister was having a particularly hectic and bad day, when a stranger called, asking him if he would consider conducting a funeral service....for her dog. "Really?" he thought. He told her, that since he'd never before done such a service, she might want to try one of the other churches in the area. The woman replied, "O.K., but would you mind giving me some advice?" "Certainly," the pastor said. "Do you think \$1,000 is a large enough appropriate honorarium for this kind of funeral?" There was a long pause, after which the pastor said, "You should have *told* me that your dog was Lutheran! Of course I'll do it!"

Maybe Jesus was just having a bad day, but his response to the Canaanite woman's desperate plea for help, seems particularly harsh. Even though many of the people of Israel called the Canaanites "unclean, foreign *dogs*," Jesus certainly knew better. And even though women in the 1st Century were treated as being vastly inferior to men, Jesus also knew that this was wrong. Throughout his ministry, Jesus shows tremendous respect for women; and he also shows a deep understanding of how Divine Love and Grace is extended to *all* people, including those customarily considered as outsiders or outcasts.

So, why does he give this Canaanite woman such a hard time? Her request is humble and sincere. She isn't even asking for herself, but is seeking healing and release for her young daughter. It's the kind of request we would expect Jesus to respond to with immediate compassion and action; but instead, he gives her the cold shoulder. The question is, "Why?" Many biblical scholars cleverly suggest that he responds in this manner in order to "teach a lesson" to his disciples, or to the woman herself. By ignoring her request, Jesus might get his disciples to stick-up for her, which isn't something they would normally do. Often, they tried to jealously guard Jesus' time and

power for themselves; or they'd get upset when he would pay attention to women or children or "outsiders." But this time, they at least acknowledge this Canaanite woman and encourage Jesus to respond.

His response, however, is extremely jarring. He tells them, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." [Now that's pretty blunt!] So then the woman herself kneels before Jesus and once again pleads her case: "Lord, help me!" But he answers, "It's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." [Now that's just plain brutal!] This image of Jesus ignoring a woman seeking help for her troubled, tormented child, and then implying that she is some kind of mangy *mongrel* - is definitely disturbing! Which is why biblical scholars attempt to clean it up, by claiming that he *really* intends to help her - but first he calculatingly plays with her emotions so that he can teach his disciples a lesson in inclusiveness; or teach her a lesson in persistence. Personally, I find that explanation far more disturbing than the possibility that Jesus was simply having a bad day - a bad day which was transformed into a remarkably good day, because of this woman's faithful persistence, and because of Jesus' own willingness to learn and adapt and grow.

If we take this encounter between Jesus and the Canaanite woman at face value - without trying to explain-away his initial response - we are presented not one, but two exceptional models for faithful and courageous living. First, there's Jesus, who is willing to be challenged and changed. One who is secure enough in his own self and in his own relationship with God, that he can immediately change direction when he sees a better way to go. One who shows us that faithfulness includes the ability to adapt and progress, trusting that our Divine Source is neither stoic nor stagnant. Then there's the Canaanite woman, who shows us that faithfulness also includes the willingness to challenge others. It's as if she believes that Jesus is capable of more than even he himself thinks he is; and that she has more faith in the abundance of Divine Compassion, than Jesus does at that particular moment.

Now, as people whose own lives may include a few blunders or bad days, you and I can certainly be encouraged by Jesus' example: to acknowledge our mistakes, learn from them, and take the appropriate corrective action. A rigid, crystalized Christ can't help us with this; but a learning, adaptable Christ can help *us* learn to let go of our mistakes and prejudices, and to move forward as God's compassionate and caring children. He can inspire us to reevaluate the way we think about those "other people" who we sometimes simply lump together and summarily dismiss as being "insignificant".

And this remarkable woman, who takes that insult Jesus throws at her, and turn it into a justification to be heard, is also truly inspirational. "You can call me a dog if you like, Jesus, I'm not going to argue. But even dogs get what they need from their master's table!" [Bow...WOW that's impressive!] This woman's ability to not be put off, but to stay focused on the needs of her suffering child, allows her to calmly, yet boldly, challenge Jesus' apparent indifference and intolerance. And that is definitely an important model of faithful, courageous living for us today.

There are still quite a few people today who seem to think that there's a serious shortage of Divine Love and Grace. Therefore, they make it their business to judge who is fit - or unfit - to receive it. It's as if they hope to hoard those precious little crumbs of grace that fall from the table. They *do* this in the name of their "faith," but what they're really demonstrating is a tremendous lack of faith, and a sorely inadequate understanding of the Eternal, Creative Giver of Life. Genuine *faith*, means that we trust completely in the abundance of Divine Compassion and Grace - not just for ourselves, but for each and every child of God!

Now, here is where all this can inspire and energize you and me today: Just as the Canaanite woman's mission to help her daughter, ends up helping Jesus remember *his* true mission, so *our* mission of "Loving, Serving and Accepting All People with God's Life-Changing Power" can also help the larger Church to remember its true mission:

To extend Divine Love and Grace to *all* people - regardless of race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or social standing;
To speak-up and act-out on behalf of those who are put-down and pushed-aside by religion or society;
To proclaim the tremendous depth of Christ's love for us all - a love that is willing to learn and grow and expand - making sure that there is ample room at the Table for all!

This morning, you and I celebrate the *abundant welcome* that flows from this Table of Grace, through this Community of Faith, and throughout the entire world! It's a truly *Divine Abundance*! One which assures us that no one has to sit up and beg for it , like a dog!