

Pentecost 11

August 16, 2020

Trusting Faith

Matthew 15:21-28

Have you noticed that dog food isn't just plain old brown crunchy tidbits anymore? Dog food used to be either canned brown sludge or hard, crunchy, brown, dusty nuggets. Some dog food required you to put water on it to make gravy, or hey, remember Gaines-Burgers — individually wrapped patties that were shaped like raw hamburger?

Nowadays, it apparently takes a scientist to create dog food. It has vegetables in it, carries nutrition labeling and sometimes is even in the fresh-food section.

We have become very particular about what we feed our dogs, haven't we? And some people don't give their dogs table scraps anymore because it just isn't good for them. While we aren't sure what the family pet ate back in Jesus' time, we know there were no Gaines-Burger, Gravy Train or Science Diet products in sight. Household dogs ate food offered from the master's table. But in scripture references, a dog is usually not mentioned as a faithful family pet, and today's scripture is no exception. Most dogs back in that day roamed the streets, scavenging for food. For the most part, a dog's life wasn't easy. What's more, "dog" was a term that Jews used for Gentiles. It wasn't exactly a compliment.

Did Jesus call this Canaanite, Gentile woman in today's scripture a dog? No, at least not directly. But the way Jews viewed her people probably led her to feel as though she would be perceived that way by Jesus and his disciples. In fact, when she first called out to Jesus, he ignored her. And, we are told, the disciples wanted to be rid of her, this non-Jewish pest of a woman. She was being a nuisance to them, so they asked Jesus to send her away.

Do we ever feel that way? Are there people we consider a bother? We may help them, but we really don't feel much compassion for them, and when we do help, we wonder why they don't appreciate it or don't embrace our faith or come to our church. Maybe they can tell we don't really care about them — we feel compelled to help, so we do, but we do it grudgingly.

And what about Jesus? In this incident, he doesn't seem to fit the image of him that we've developed from almost every other incident in the Gospels. In those stories, he appears caring and willing to take time even for "the least of these." Here, however, Jesus seems not to care about this woman and her sick daughter, as if he's being ... well, *un-Christlike*. And the story does not explain his behavior.

From what the story does tell us, we can speculate that he was testing the woman to see if she had enough faith for him to actually perform the miracle she was requesting. Or we can posit that Jesus' humanness, like ours, needed to be pushed in order for him to see beyond the prejudices of his day. It's

also possible that he was showing respect for this woman by verbally sparring with her the way rabbis did with one another. Maybe he was helping her to see the strength in her own faith and persistence, to recognize the power in it so she could draw on it later. It might even be that he spoke to this woman as he did to make a point to his disciples, who were witnessing this encounter.

It would, perhaps, have been simpler to just heal her daughter and send the woman on her way, but what would his disciples have learned? How many times have we given the quick and easy solution to a need for ministry? Perhaps we throw money at a problem that would be better helped by our personal attention. How many times have we texted, emailed or tweeted someone when a call or visit would have better met a hurting person's needs? But whatever was going on inside of Jesus, he did eventually do as the woman asked.

We see from the story that this non-Jewish woman addressed Jesus as “Lord, Son of David.” She apparently acknowledged him as the Messiah even as many of his own people scoffed at that title.

And she had faith that Jesus could heal her daughter. So, when Jesus did not respond to her first entreaty, she pushed forward, knelt before him and repeated her plea. Being a Gentile, she likely came with no sense of entitlement — not as though Jesus owed her a healing, not as his equal. Even

when Jesus suggested he had come “only to the lost sheep of . . . Israel” (a belief his own disciples embraced) and said, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs,” she accepted the insult — if that’s what it was — and responded, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.”

In so saying, she claimed a spot in his household, even if it had to be a second-class position, or even as a dog under the family table. She was willing to accept any scrap he would throw her way — just a moment of his time.

As biblical commentator Alexander Maclaren says, “She does not ask a place at the table, nor anything taken from those who have a prior claim to a more abundant share in his mercies. A crumb is enough for her, which they will never miss.”

In this entitled life most of us lead, we might be more than a little offended at this point. In her position, we might have said, “Lord, I’m not less than anyone else. I have as much right to be treated right and to be blessed as anyone else does!”

But this woman does not get upset. Instead, she persists with her request. And why? She loves her daughter and expects Jesus to heal the child — not because of who *she* is, but because of who *he* is!

She knows that to these Jews traveling with Jesus, she *is*, at best, like a dog under a table and that she has no claim on Jesus' presence, his time or his care. But she also has faith that even a crumb will be enough to meet her need and heal her daughter. She is truly humble. And Jesus tells her and the disciples, "Woman, great is your faith." Now they have seen what great faith really is. And he heals her daughter — just like that.

So here are two questions for us:

First, how often do we attempt to lay a healing on someone from afar — a quick fix when a full conversation or relationship would be better? It's clear from this passage that even Jesus doesn't do that!

Who said you can either throw a fish at a man and feed him for a day, or teach him to fish for himself and feed him for a lifetime? Nobody has ever taught a man to fish with a checkbook and a roll of stamps. Sometimes, you must get in there and apply the healing personally, talk it through, help strengthen the person for another day.

And second, is our faith strong enough to believe that even a crumb from Jesus' table is enough? Or do we believe that only the Science Diet, full-blown, fresh-from-the-meat-case-and-lobster-tank version is good enough for us because we are the best kind of church-going, Jesus-following, devotion-reading, tithing, serving humans there are? Are we more entitled to God's

blessings than other people are? Does Jesus love everyone or just us “good” Christians? And if you say, “No, of course Jesus loves everybody equally,” you’re right!

So, of course we should behave toward others as if we believe that.

And one more thing: The 19th-century writer Samuel Butler said, “The greatest pleasure of a dog is that you may make a fool of yourself with him, and not only will he not scold you, but he will make a fool of himself, too.”

So perhaps we can lead a dog’s life for Jesus — content with whatever blessings he bestows on us and willing to make fools of ourselves for him. If you think the things you might do with him, for him or about him make you look foolish, you can be okay, knowing that he has already done good things for you that many over the course of 2,000 years have seen as foolish.

Make him your master and enjoy life with a faith that is so strong, you can even accept a Gaines-Burger if that’s what he gives you! In the end, that’s what faith is all about. You see, faith isn’t about marching up to Jesus and telling him why we’re entitled to his love, why we’re deserving of his special care. No, faith is ultimately about kneeling before Jesus and trusting that even though we don’t deserve his love, trusting that even though we’re entitled to nothing from him, that Jesus loves us so much that he’ll freely do for us far more than we could ever hope for. That’s the kind of faith that that woman finally found. And may that be the very same kind of faith that we, in our

lives, find as well.