

II LENT 2014
SERMON – CHRIST CHURCH PARISH
FATHER CRAIG LOONEY
ST. MATT. 15.21

✠

First, Jesus ignored her cry for help. Then, when she persisted, he called her a dog, not even good enough to eat scraps from the table.

The dog Jesus speaks of in the Gospel is unlike the hyper-friendly Airedale Wilfred of the Altborg household, who waits with often-impatient annoyance for a crunchy toast crust from the breakfast table...but rather an undomesticated roving wild dog of the unfriendly kind.

Dogs are mentioned 40 times in the Bible, never in a good way. In India and certain parts of the Middle East today, feral dogs that hang around the garbage dumps and roam the streets looking for food are called *pariah dogs*. When we apply the term *pariah* to a person, we are saying that person is someone we don't want to be around...who is unwelcome in our group of friends...who is a social outcast.

Today's Gospel is hard for us to swallow and it is perplexing because of the dismissive and insulting way Jesus appears to deal with the Canaanite woman...a mother who comes to Jesus to ask him to heal her sick daughter. She was doing what all good mothers would do when her child gets sick...she went looking for help. Jesus' disciples just wanted him to send her away because she was making so much noise and attracting unwanted attention.

The Canaanites were the original inhabitants of the Promised Land. They may have been descendants of Canaan, one of Noah's grandsons. The history between Jews and Canaanites is contentious. Jews considered the Canaanites, like they considered all Gentiles, to be pariahs; outcasts they didn't want to be around. The Canaanite mother was taking a huge risk coming to Jesus for help.

But she was persistent and she wasn't going to let Jesus ignoring her or calling her names put her off. If Jesus is going to ignore her and pretend like she isn't there, she'll just fall down at his feet and cry out even louder. And calling her a dog isn't going to shut her up either. She would not let insults turn her into a dejected hound running away because someone was calling her names. She was there to get Jesus to heal her daughter. And she would get the help she needed.

Ignoring someone and giving them the silent treatment is probably one of the worst things we can do to another person. It's the same as saying that person is dead. We know how that feels if we are on the receiving end of someone's silent treatment. And even today, calling someone a dog or being called a dog our selves isn't exactly a compliment.

Jesus never said or did anything without a reason. He knew exactly how the Canaanite mother felt and it was never his intention to make her feel worse than she already felt because her daughter was sick and in a terrible condition. He had every intention of doing exactly what she asked him to do...make her daughter well again. So why the silent treatment and why the name calling?

What Jesus wanted was for the mother to say out loud what she already believed in her heart. By calling Jesus, "Son of David", she was saying that she knew his mission was primarily to his own people and she was out of his league. But when she turned an insult around and gave it right back at him and said even dogs get to eat table scraps, she was saying, "If you can help your own people, you can certainly help me."

Jesus told the mother she had great faith and her daughter was well again. The Gospel doesn't record any more dialogue between Jesus and the mother. His assurance that her daughter was well again is all she needed to hear. She returned home, knowing she did the right thing for her daughter, and knowing it was Jesus who put their lives back in order and made them whole again.

Jesus wants us to respond to him with the same kind of Faith the Canaanite mother showed. The mother's faith was an action...our Faith must also be an action... asking God for help in getting our sometimes messy lives in order. We need to be persistent in our prayer lives, fully confident that our prayers are answered.

Prayer is not a magic act to try to convince ourselves the more we pray or the more people we can get to pray the more likely we will get God's attention. We already have his full and undivided attention. We leave here today knowing that Jesus can and will help us work our way through seemingly impossible and hopeless situations.

And that's better than table scraps.

✠