

II Lent 2021

Sermon – Saint Joseph Parish

Father Craig Looney

*1 Thess. 4.1-8 St. Matt. 15.21-28*

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We do love our pets! Who can resist “accidentally” dropping a scrap of food on the floor to be quickly devoured by Fido or Fluffy? For those of us who have the companionship of a dog or cat...we know what a blessing it is to have them in our lives.

Dogs are mentioned more than 40 times in the Bible. With the exception of the lion and leopard...cats aren't mentioned at all in the Bible. While domesticated dogs were not unknown to First Century Jews...they were used for hunting and shepherding...they were often associated with wild dogs that ran around in packs, hung around garbage dumps, and even ate dead bodies. they were considered pariahs and the worst of unclean. In the New Testament...calling a human being a dog meant that person was an evil bottom feeder. That's what makes today's Gospel so poignant.

The Canaanite mother in the Gospel is a social outcast among the Jews. The Canaanites were the original inhabitants of the Promised Land. There was a great deal of tension between Jews and Canaanites. They tried to avoid interacting with each other. That does not stop our desperate mother from coming to Jesus to ask him to heal her sick daughter, whom she says has a demon and is in a terrible condition.

Jesus initially ignores the mother's cries for help. His disciples want him to send her away because she is making so much noise. They showed little compassion for her or her daughter. Not what one would expect from future leaders of the Church...but they would learn. To make matters worse...Jesus says he is sent only to the lost sheep...to the people of Israel. Jesus is clear his primary mission is to his own people...the Jews. But he also never said no to someone who asked for his help.

Undeterred by Jesus' apparent dismissive attitude...our Canaanite mother falls down at Jesus' feet and begs for him to heal her daughter. She was taking a big risk getting this close to Jesus knowing what people thought of her.

To add insult to injury...Jesus says to the crowd it isn't right to take the children's food and give it to dogs. Has Jesus just called our desperate mother a dog...a pariah to be avoided? Even today, if someone were to call another person a dog, it isn't exactly a compliment, although it wouldn't provoke the same response it would have in today's Gospel.

Rather than crawling away like the proverbial rejected hound dog, our mother gives it right back at Jesus. She tells him even dogs get to feed off the leftovers. Her persistence and faith got her what she wanted. Jesus healed her daughter. He always intended to heal her. He knew what was in the mother's heart. He wanted the disciples to witness her faith. His mission was indeed to his own people...it would be his disciples mission and the Church's mission to take the Gospel to the rest of the world.

We have heard from our friend Saint Paul our Faith must be active and productive. He tells us in the Epistle our lives should be ordered around pleasing God. That means we approach our work with the understanding everyone has value in God's eyes. We may not wrong or take advantage of others...or call them names...because they look, sound or act differently than us. We don't need to look any further than the Gospel and how Jesus responded to the cries of a desperate mother.

Like the mother in the Gospel...we must be persistent when we pray and ask God for help...to heal us in mind, body and soul. We should never think of prayer as a magic act to get God to help us. Prayer is our confident Faith response to Jesus' invitation to come to him with our burdens so he can help relieve them. And we should always thank God...he likes that!

Our attitudes toward dogs and cats may have changed over the centuries. The Gospel is ultimately about God's attitude toward us and our attitude toward others. Our hearts must be predisposed toward love and service to others.

We're now in a better position to receive the Body and Blood of Christ in the Sacrament of the Altar...and that's better than any leftovers!

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