

II Lent 2024
Sermon – Saint Joseph Parish
Father Craig Looney
St. Matthew 15.21-28



“Gone to the dogs” is an expression we sometimes hear to describe something that has gotten worse...perhaps our once favorite restaurant has “gone to the dogs”. Dogs are mentioned 41 times in the Bible...often in negative contexts. They are often grouped with evildoers, murderers and Samaritans. But even in Jesus’ time domesticated dogs served as hunting dogs, sheep dogs, guard dogs and companions. One thing for certain...Fido does like the table scraps.

What does God say about taking care of dogs? He declared everything he created to be good...including dogs! In Proverbs (12.10) we read...“A good man takes care of his animals, but wicked men are cruel to theirs.” And here’s an interesting morsel of biblical trivia: The only breed of dog mentioned in the Bible is also found in Proverbs (30.31)...the Greyhound.

Does all of this talk about dogs have anything to do with today’s Gospel? The word “dog” is used in the Bible in both a literal and metaphorical sense. In this morning’s Gospel, Jesus and his disciples are traveling north through Galilee on his way to Tyre and Sidon, coastal cities about 40 miles from his base of operations in Capernaum. This is Gentile territory.

A Canaanite woman heard Jesus was nearby and came to him to ask him to heal her daughter...who had a demon and was in a terrible condition. The Canaanites were the original inhabitants of the area Jesus and the disciples were walking through. They were pagans and considered unclean.

The mother in the Gospel is a brave and determined woman. She knew who Jesus was, and calls him “Son of David”, one of the names for the Messiah. She was taking a chance coming to Jesus for help. She was risking ridicule and humiliation...she knew she wasn’t welcome...even Jesus’ disciples tried to get him to send her away because she was making so much noise.

At first Jesus ignores the mother. That seems out of character for the man who came to

teach and heal and suffer for our sake. His primary mission was to his own people...the “lost sheep, the people of Israel”. Our desperate mother only wants what’s best for her daughter and cries out even louder, “Help me, sir!”

Jesus looks directly at her and tells her it’s not right to give the children’s food to dogs. Instead of being reduced to tears and running away, she has a great comeback. “Well, maybe that’s true”, she said to Jesus. “But even dogs get to eat scraps that fall from their master’s table.” Jesus tells the woman she has great faith and sends her home with the assurance her daughter is healed.

Today, calling someone a dog doesn’t have the same meaning it had for the Canaanite woman or the disciples. Jesus never says or does anything without a reason. He wasn’t really insulting the mother. He wanted her to verbally demonstrate the faith he knew she had in her heart. He wanted her to be persistent...it showed she really believed he could do something for her and heal her daughter.

The Canaanite mother is a good example for us to remember as we continue our Lenten journey to the cross. Jesus wants to see and hear us display the same kind of faith he got from her. He wants us to come to him believing he can and will help us not only with our spiritual needs, but our physical needs as well.

In the Collect we ask God to “*keep us both outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls*” and to “*defend us from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul*”.

The real food Jesus offered the Canaanite mother was himself...he showed that his healing ministry extended even to those who weren’t part of the “lost sheep”. Jesus offers us himself in his Body and Blood in the Sacrament of the Altar.

Our faith response is to recognize and proclaim Jesus for who he is, the Son of God, and like the Canaanite woman show God we too are serious about Jesus, and believe.

When we leave here today...we can be certain we leave with more than table scraps!

