

Defilement, Dogs, and Dignity

A SERMON ON MATTHEW 15: 10-28 AND ISAIAH 56: 1-8

*Now may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight O Lord, our rock, and our redeemer.*

It's no big secret that I love dogs.

They're loyal, loving, playful - easier to get along with than many people.
If I were to compare someone to a dog, it would be a great compliment.
And I know I'm not alone in my esteem for our furry best friends.
...but our early ancestors in the faith had different associations with canines.



Today's gospel lesson is another in the "Things I wish Jesus never said" category.
And I'm not going to pretend I fully understand this one.
But let's wrestle with it together, shall we?

The first part of the gospel reading makes enough sense,
where Jesus is explaining to the Pharisees that
being clean in God's eyes has more to do with your interior disposition,
the thoughts and actions that arise one's heart,
than it does with external ritual actions.

I think this way of thinking makes sense to a lot of us,
Ritual cleanliness and defilement however are somewhat foreign concepts.
Ritual purity has little to nothing to do with morality.
Ritual purity is simply the state of being in which one is prepared to approach God.
Defilement gets in the way of that.

In Jewish thought,
any number of things can cause defilement,
perfectly natural things that one cannot avoid in life.



Things that don't make you morally bad, but rather incomplete.
The Hebrew idea hiding behind the Greek that the English translates as "unclean"
is *tame* (*taw-may*),
which has more to do with loss than with filth or shame.
But it gets translated in terms of cleanliness because there is no direct equivalent,
in Greek or English.

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The evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, and so on that Jesus mentions are now being put in this category too.

These things are moral offenses, but not ONLY moral offenses.

Jesus is telling us that such things also put us in this state of incompleteness, a state of not being fully ourselves, a state of being separated from God and from neighbor.



So much for the easy part of this sermon.

What do we do with the interaction

Jesus and the disciples have with the Canaanite woman?

Jesus goes into a Gentile region

- Tyre and Sidon are along the coast of the Mediterranean, on the northern fringes of Israel.

And pay attention to that - He chooses to go there.

Where this Gentile woman desperate for her daughter's healing asks Jesus for mercy, and she is ignored, thought a nuisance, and essentially called a dog. Called a dog by analogy.

Dogs were considered unclean...

after all dogs are associated with rolling in dead things and doing other unseemly things.

But what about in this new delineation of what it is to be unclean?

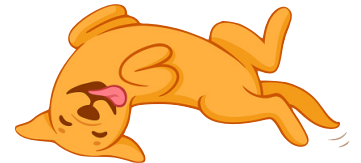
Dogs get a bit of redemption here.

Most dogs I know have pretty wonderful things coming from their hearts.

But in this passage, the shift comes with the wit of the Canaanite woman.

What is it that proceeds from her mouth?

- nothing included on the list of all the evils that actually defile a person. rather, a bringing of the dog into the family, maintaining that even dogs have a place at/or under the table. and even people considered outsiders can experience God's love and mercy.



It is hard to hear this talk of table and not think of this table...the Communion table. especially when in Greek the words for table and altar are one and the same.

In many ways our communion service has evolved and continues to evolve through the years - often a painful process.

But there are still pieces that hearken back through the centuries.

The Gifts of God, for the People of God. - you've probably heard the phrase.

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The Greek version this line is based off of is τὰ ἅγια τοῖς ἁγίοις “Holy things for the holy”

- holy things, the gifts of God, being the communion elements.

Earlier in Matthew’s gospel, (7:6) Jesus tells his disciples

“do not give what is holy to the dogs, nor cast your pearls before swine.”

Our Communion table isn’t fenced - and we use the softer version of the line “Gifts of God for the people of God” not to disrespect the holiness of the sacrament, but because even dogs are allowed crumbs, and we are in no position to judge who’s a dog.

It is commonly repeated that calling the Canaanite woman a dog was something of a “racial slur.” I’m not convinced.

Sure, Gentiles could be and were likened to dogs, but so were Jews.

In the verses immediately following our Old Testament readings actually,

Isaiah has some harsh words for his own people:

“Israel’s watchmen are blind, they all lack knowledge;
they are all mute dogs, they cannot bark;
they lie around and dream, they love to sleep.
They are dogs with mighty appetites; they never have enough.
They are shepherds who lack understanding;
they all turn to their own way, they seek their own gain.”



Dogginess in biblical usage seems to be generally insulting.

And yes, specifying that she is a Canaanite,

especially when Canaanites weren’t around in the first century, emphasizes that is of an enemy people.

Despite the difficulty of this passage, I’m actually thankful for its inclusion in the Bible.

Not just for the slight elevation of dogs, but also that

it recognizes that God does not always act in ways we expect or understand.

When the woman first makes her request, Jesus basically ignores her.

How many times have you ever felt ignored in the face of unanswered prayer.

When she keeps bothering Him, He seems to suggest that she is not worthy.



There are certainly times when such thoughts arise:

that the Lord just doesn’t care

or we’re not good enough to warrant any divine attention.

That we are in whatever way, outside of the field of His concern.

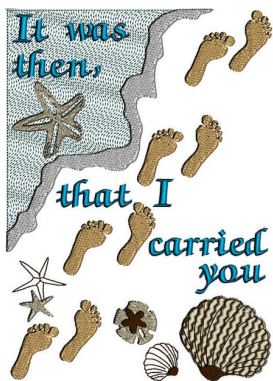
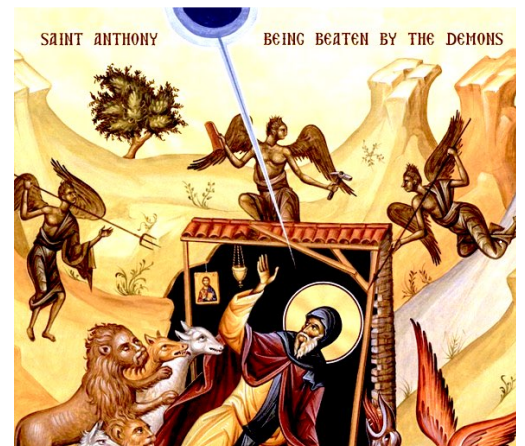
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This passage acknowledges the reality of this experience.

Anthony the Great, sometimes called the first monk, more like the first famous one, was a Christian living in Egypt in the fourth century.

The story of his life, as told by his bishop, Saint Athanasius, recounts many spiritual struggles. In the midst of a particularly bad assault, Anthony saw a bright light...

“Suddenly the demons vanished and the pain in his body immediately ceased and his dwelling was once again whole. Antony perceived the Lord’s help, and when he took a deep breath and realized that he had been relieved of his suffering, he entreated the vision that had appeared to him: ‘Where are you? Why did you not appear at the beginning so you could stop my suffering?’ And a voice came to him: ‘Antony, I was here, but I waited to see your struggle. and now, since you persevered and were not defeated, I will be a helper to you always and I will make you famous everywhere.’”



This might remind you of the famous poem *Footprints in the Sand*, in which a man walking along the shoreline of life side by side with the Lord notes that during the most difficult, saddest events of his life, there was only one set of footprints in the sand. And he too demands of the Lord - where were you? My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? And the answer comes: it was there that I carried you.

Our interpretation of events in our lives and God’s action through them is often not the same as the way God sees it.

But what are we to make of Jesus’ reluctance to help this woman and her daughter?

It is true enough that Israel holds a special place in salvation history, and even that the mission to the gentiles was in some way connected with the Jews’ rejection of Jesus. Was Jesus just trying to do things “properly and in order”? Maybe that’s part of it.

But even in the Old Testament, we see an overflow of God’s grace go beyond the Israelites.

Our reading this morning from Isaiah mentions two groups that were on the fringes of Jewish society:

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eunuchs, - not being able to have children was quite a barrier to normal family life, and foreigners.

Isaiah assures both that they will not be cut off from God's blessings,
will not be cut off from being counted among God's people.

The Lord says: "Their whole burnt offerings and sacrifices shall be accepted upon My altar,
for My house shall be called House of Prayer for All Nations."

But this was with the expectation that those foreigners were being joined to God's people,
keeping the Sabbath.

There is one explanation that rather like that I saw recorded in several commentaries and sermons
from the first 500 years or so of Christian history.

In his homily on this passage, John Chrysostom, bishop of Constantinople in the 4th century,
summed up this mystery saying:

"He did not want that such great virtue as was in the woman should be hid.
Not insult then were his words spoken,
but calling her forth, and revealing the treasure laid up in her"

These virtues are threefold.

First, her faith - the very thing Christ commends in her.

She believed that Jesus could heal her daughter and would do it.

Second, her patience and perseverance, in continuing her prayer,
even in the face of tacit refusal and being ignored and insulted.

Third is her humility. And humility done right.

She accepts the label of dog,

but not in a way that would have her give up and be resigned to the proverbial doghouse.

but in such a way that shows that insists on her, and her daughter, still having value.

She doesn't need to be at the head of the table, but she knows she needs to be at the table.

And Jesus praises her for this, and lets it be done according to her will.

We can all find inspiration in this woman,

and be comforted in our own struggles to be faithful, patient, and humble,

and to rest assured that even if we think ourselves dogs,

even that does not separate us from the love of God.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.