

## We Are the Dogs – Ben Wayman

Genesis 45:1-15; Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32; Matthew 15:10-28

My dad was recently approached after the Sunday morning service by a high school student who asked if he could interview him for a school project. My dad was honored, but even more than that, he was excited by the invitation. Like many pastors, he relishes the opportunity to impart wisdom upon inquisitive youth. So they set up a phone interview for 3:00 in the afternoon later that day.

At 3:00 my dad's phone rang. He answered and was completely caught off guard by the youth's first question: *What's it like to live with a disability?* -prompted the voice on the other line. *A disability?* -my dad replied. *A disability.* -responded the teenager. *You're bald.*

My dad then found himself answering a series of questions including: *How does it feel to be bald? When did you first realize you were balding? What challenges does being bald bring to your life? Have you taken any measures to remedy your baldness?* Clearly, this youth had a unique perspective on disabilities. And my dad was completely blindsided by this perspective.

This is exactly what has happened to us today in our Gospel reading. We were blindsided by a startling perspective. Did you catch it?

[Read Gospel vv.21-28 again.]

If you still didn't catch it, don't be too hard on yourself. Christians have had a hard time catching it for the past two thousand years. In fact, our reading from Romans today shows how Christians even in Paul's time were having a hard time with this perspective.

I think that our difficulty to understand the encounter between Jesus and the Canaanite woman lies in the fact that we don't know where to place ourselves in the story and even if we do, we don't know what to make of it. And I'd like to suggest that our difficulty with this story is an indication of a larger problem we have with understanding our place in the grand story of God's plan to save the world.

So if we are puzzled by Jesus ignoring the Canaanite woman, if his dismissal of her as a Gentile struck us as profoundly *unChristian*, and if his insinuation that the woman was nothing but a dog offended us, then we are confused about our place in God's saving work in the world.

My second year of Seminary began with a course in Christian Ethics. The first day my professor read this very passage from Matthew to the class. When she was done, she looked up from her Bible, peering above the frame of her glasses, scanned the room, and dramatically stated: *We're the dogs. We're the dogs.*

This morning I would like for us to consider what it might mean for us to see ourselves as dogs at God's table. When we begin to see ourselves in this story as the Canaanite woman – a Gentile outsider, a woman in a man's world, we begin to see rightly our place in salvation history. We are the dogs. We are not God's beloved Israel.

For the past several weeks, we have been re-tracing the story of Israel. We've rehearsed God's election of Abraham to be a blessing to all nations. We've celebrated how God provided Abraham and Sarah with a son, Isaac, late in life. We've witnessed how God loved Isaac's son Jacob, but hated Esau. We've seen how Jacob favored his son Joseph above all his brothers. And today, we read of how God refashioned the evil that Joseph's brothers had intended for him into a gracious provision not only for Joseph's family, but for all of Egypt.

Like it or not, God has favorites. Consistently throughout Scripture, God elects Israel to be his #1 agent of salvation in the world.

Just a week ago a friend confidently stated to me that the Jews are hopelessly lost – that if they don't get their act together, they will not be saved. In chapters 9-11 of Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome he takes up this very question. Here Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, addresses the question – what about Israel? Are they outside of God's salvation?

Our reading today finds us at the climax of Paul's discussion regarding Israel. Paul writes, "I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means!...God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew...For the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable." For Paul, Israel's disobedience has opened the door of God's blessing to the whole world. God's plan is mercy and this mercy, Paul explains in verse 32, will be shown to *everyone*.

Christians have used this statement by Paul in verse 32 throughout to argue in favor of universalism – in the end, God's love wins out. No matter what. But this morning, I'd like for us to focus specifically on Israel and our relationship as Gentiles to God's chosen people. All three of our texts address the chosenness of Israel, and I think our word from God this morning is simply this: God has chosen Israel to share God's salvation with us.

Seeing ourselves in this way – as recipients of God's care and provision, but only secondarily and indirectly – helps us see more clearly our place in the grand story of God's saving action. And when we see more clearly our place, we know how to act with sharper focus and dogged faithfulness.

So let's return to Jesus' claim that we are the dogs. What might it mean for us to live like dogs?

I'd like to suggest three practical ways in which seeing ourselves as dogs help us better follow Christ. We'll take the Canaanite woman as our model.

**First**, living like a dog means we are not afraid to bark – or shout – at God. Notice how in verse 22 the Canaanite woman shouts at Jesus. She knew that she was not at the center of Jesus's attention, but she tried to get his attention anyway. In response, Jesus ignored her – we read that “he did not answer her at all.” The disciples also were annoyed at her barking – they wanted to send the mutt away.

To live like a dog is to live without a sense of entitlement. To mix metaphors, we must acknowledge that we have been grafted to the tree of Israel. We are not the root, but we are a branch that has been grafted onto Israel. This changes the way we talk about salvation. It is all gift and it is a gift that has come to us not directly from God, but indirectly, through Israel.

**Second**, living like a dog means we are not afraid to beg. Many Christians take great pride in never asking for help even in times of need – be it from the government, or their church, or a family member, or a friend. To be sure, exploiting the generosity of others is something Christians should be careful to avoid. But to honestly voice a need and request help is a profoundly Christian practice: “Lord, help me.” – pleaded the Canaanite woman. When we voice our needs to God and to others, we acknowledge that we are not independent people. Rather, we depend on God and others for our most basic needs. Over the past few months we have exercised this practice well here at St Paul's and we would do well to see this as a distinctly Christian practice.

To live like a dog in this second sense of begging is to live without pretense. The Canaanite woman recognizes she does not belong to the house of Israel, but she begs Jesus's assistance anyway. In fact, some interpreters see her kneeling as an indication that she worshipped Jesus. When we petition God in worship, we beg for God's mercy.

So to live like a dog means to shout at God and beg him for mercy, just as he has shown mercy to Israel. There is no room for entitlement or pretense in the Christian life. We are the dogs.

A **third** sense in which we might live more faithfully is to receive with gratitude the crumbs that fall from the master's table. Two observations can be made here.

First, when we gratefully receive the crumbs that fall from God's table, we forfeit any claim to high status. We are not seated at the table, we are under it. Our grateful reception of God's grace that goes first to the Jew and secondarily to us as Gentiles is an honest recognition of our place in God's saving of the world. This is why Paul treats the question: “has God rejected his people?” as an absurdity. God has not nor will he ever reject his children. So our first observation is that we Gentiles live on a steady diet of fallen crumbs. And the nature of this diet should form in us a distinct sort of humility.

A second observation, related to the first, is that the crumbs that fall from God's table are more than enough. And the abundant crumbs that fall from God's overflowing table of provision is for everyone. God's love for us is so rich and so deep that we are not only sustained, but we are perfectly nourished by God's lavish provision for the world. It's important for us to note that the Canaanite woman wasn't blindsided by Jesus's description of her as a dog. Rather, she owned it as soon as Jesus said it, and in her owning of it, she was able to see clearly that God's provision was more than enough, even for her.

While God's word to us today may come as a bit of a shock and though it may jar our sense of entitlement, privilege and pride, we should hear it as good news. God's love is so rich, it is so extravagant, that it spills off the table onto the floor and is enough for the whole world. In fact, it is more than enough for the world – even for us.

Hear the good news: God is faithful. God is faithful to the Jew first and then the Gentile. God's desire is to shower the world with his love, despite our disobedience, even in light of our disobedience, "so that he may be merciful to all." God's mercy is *more* than enough. Even for us.