

## ***Dogs and Crumbs<sup>1</sup>***

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT  
September 8, 2024  
Text: Mark 7:24-30

Today's Bible story is probably one of the more challenging ones for us because it reveals a side to Jesus we just can't imagine was really there. I mean, this is Jesus we're talking about! Jesus who's kind and loving to everyone! Jesus who heals the blind and the lame, plays with little children, and restores life! How could the Jesus in this story be the same Jesus we think we know? What the heck is going on here anyway? I mean, dog food – he compares this woman and her sick child to dogs? Geesh. The whole dogs and crumbs aspect to this story is what makes it so compelling for us, I think. It's so unexpected and so earthy. I mean, whether you have a dog or not, the dogs metaphor is a powerful one. And it's just as powerful today as it was when Jesus used it! Think about it. If Jesus had said the same thing to the woman using a different, softer metaphor – like, "I came to wash the hands of the children of Israel first and I don't know if there will be enough water left if I do what you ask" – it just wouldn't have the same jolt to it. That would have just made Jesus sound sort of blah.

No, it's clear that Jesus uses such powerful, visceral language precisely because it resonates so forcefully throughout this encounter. We should stop here and remind ourselves that this story in the Gospel of Mark, like all stories about Jesus in any of the gospels, was first part of an oral tradition which preserved them through word of mouth for decades before they were written down. Mark, today's Gospel, was written down at least 60 years after the events it records. So, some scholars have attempted to explain away this story about Jesus and his encounter with a Gentile (non-Jewish) woman from a foreign culture by

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from the sermon *Dog Food* preached by Rev. Ruth on June 28, 2015.

saying that the oral tradition sensationalized the language over time incorporating its own biases and prejudices into the story as it was told over and over again. This would mean that while there was some sort of encounter with a foreign woman which got a little testy, Jesus would never have actually said she and her child were dogs unworthy of what he had to offer. Not *our* Jesus!!!

Well, let's not be so quick to let Jesus off the hook here. Given the circumstances, this encounter as described in Mark – and by the way Matthew also recounts this same story – probably did happen pretty much the way it's presented in the text. There's every reason to believe that if a foreign, Gentile woman approached Jesus directly, a single Jewish male she didn't know, he would have been startled at minimum and probably downright angry. In Jesus' culture – the Jewish culture of 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine – no woman would dare to approach a man she didn't know so directly. It just was not done. Women were not the equal of men in that culture, not even close. They were property as were their children, belonging to the husband, or if he were dead, to his heir whoever that might be. A woman alone would never, ever, have approached a single adult male, especially one who was not of her own culture and religious tradition.

This woman, on the other hand, came right to Jesus as soon as she knew he was passing through town. He was inside someone's house and clearly trying to keep a low profile. It helps to know that this encounter happens after he has fed the 5000 with loaves and fishes and after he has walked on the water to reach the disciples who had gone ahead of him by boat. It also happened after he had been doing healings everywhere he traveled. In fact, that's why he sought shelter in this house. He was trying to get away from all the people clamoring to be healed. Then in barges this woman, a foreign woman at that. She comes over and bows down at his feet – the typical subservient position of a woman approaching any man in similar circumstances. And then

she makes her plea for Jesus to heal her daughter. No doubt, she was expecting Jesus to do what he had already been doing all day, healing people. I mean, why wouldn't he?

But Jesus didn't respond the way she expected. Jesus didn't respond the way *we* expect. Jesus essentially says – no. No, I won't heal your daughter. “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.” What? What did he say? Did he just call my child a dog? Did he just call me a dog? What is going on here, we wonder, right along with the woman? Again, it helps to know that the children Jesus says need to be fed first are the children of Israel. Jesus was a Jew after all and most of his ministry up to this point was clearly directed to the Jewish community. He had healed non-Jews before and most likely not everyone who sat on that hillside to hear him and be fed a meal of loaves and fishes was Jewish. But a lot of them were. And that was always Jesus' intention. So, maybe, just maybe, when this woman barges into this house where he's trying to get a little break from all the clamoring people following him around, he just snaps. He's had it. He's tired, he's weary and he just wants to be left alone. So he reacts in a very typically human way. He says something really mean to the person who's bugging him, just to let them know he's had it. Let's be honest, we've all done that. We know we have. But Jesus? Jesus doesn't do that! He's *Jesus!*

Yes, exactly. He is Jesus. And that's why the woman didn't let his mean spirited words throw her off or dissuade her from her purpose in accosting him. Her daughter was ill – possessed by a demon as they believed then. And this man, this Jesus, was the key to getting her well again. So, the woman, most likely still bowed over in that subservient position, this gutsy woman says to his feet – “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.” Wow, brilliant! Smarter than anything the disciples had ever come up with! This woman literally took Jesus' own metaphor – the same mean spirited words intended to drive

her away – and turned them upside down to bolster her own request. “Even the dogs get to eat the children’s crumbs.” Yikes! That brought Jesus face to face with just how mean he had been. He also realized she was not going to go away until she got what she had come for. Most importantly, he knew that she had complete faith he could do what she was asking him to do so he says, “For saying that you may go – the demon has left your daughter.”

This woman – this mother of a sick child – wins an argument with Jesus. Actually, she bests him in an argument! She gets Jesus to change his mind! But there’s actually more going on here, even than that. This unnamed Gentile woman from Syria, Phoenician by culture, actually taught Jesus the lesson he had just been teaching others – that religious customs and traditions should never stand in the way of responding to someone in need. Only a few hours earlier, Jesus had been railing against the Pharisees for criticizing his disciples for not engaging in the proscribed ritual bathing before eating. “You abandon the commandment of God and hold to the human tradition,” is what he says to the Pharisees. And then, just a little while later, he demeans a non-Jewish woman who came to him for help calling her a dog. Her comments back to him reminding him that even dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the table forced him to see himself in the same light as the Pharisees. Imagine that.

Two aspects of this story are important for us to hold on to as we consider how it connects with our 21<sup>st</sup> century lives. First is the persistence of the mother fighting for the life of her child. She would not be deterred by anything, even this man who was supposed to be so wonderful, so sure to help her, even when this man calls her and her child a dog. She doesn’t give in or give up. She is not dissuaded from her mission. She fights for what she wants, what she needs, and she succeeds. So, the question she poses for us is a simple one – what would happen if we the members and friends of this church made a

commitment to explore how each of us can make a positive difference in our community? Put another way, what more could we be doing as a church to model for others outside our walls what we say we believe? How can we get our message to folks outside the church who are hungering for what we have to offer, even if they aren't clear on that themselves? This is *the* question we have been struggling with during this, our first Threshold year dedicated to building the foundation for what we hope will be the future of our church. We have made a lot of progress, that's for sure. Our building's issues are being addressed by our Trustees and it is being used now by the community more than it has been in years and that is so exciting! But, what more can we be doing? What more should we be doing to encourage folks to come through our doors on a *Sunday* morning? That's the question we need to focus on and, honestly, I am not sure of the answer. All I can say is that as time has gone on, I am more convinced than ever that worship together on Sunday mornings has always been and still remains the heartbeat of the church.

This is, I think, the second truth of this story about the Cyro-Phoenician woman. She realized that her encounter with Jesus needed to be personal and direct to have the outcome she was hoping for, the outcome she needed. Put more simply, when it comes to our situation in the church, it matters a lot whether you are here on Sunday mornings, and at other times too. This has become easy to forget as our livestreaming ministry has taken hold. Make no mistake, I am beyond thrilled that folks can join us online when life is too busy to make it here some weeks. I am deeply moved that connecting with us online when in person isn't possible for so many different reasons – illness, distance, just plain time crunch – continues to be so important to people. I also love that our online worship service is accessed by so many people once it has been recorded and then stored on our Facebook page. I'm sure most of you wonder how many people are joining us live, and that does

vary from week to week, but it's usually about a dozen or so. By the end of the day, when I check the numbers again, it's usually around 60-80 that have accessed the service long enough to register as a viewer. In other words, they're not just scrolling past. By mid-week, that number is closer to 160 plus. So, clearly, folks are finding something of value in our broadcast Sunday morning worship. That's wonderful! But it's not really enough.

Why isn't it, you might be wondering. Good question. Virtual presence alone in the life of the church is not enough because there is something synergistic – energy generating – when we gather together as God's people on Sunday morning in this space soaked with the prayers and songs and energies of all those folks who came before us here. As the folks who were our anchor point of that first generation of people here pass away – remember, this church is only 60+ years old – we of the next generation need to pick up the mantle of excitement, energy and enthusiasm that built this church. More than that, we need to be nurtured by their presence in our collective memory, excited about the future and how we are being called by God to move forward, as the people of God gathered together in this place. It's up to us to do that work and I am confident that if we continue to work together to do that as we have been doing, we will continue to discern God's path forward into the future for us. But, dear ones, we have to do that *together* and, at least some of the time, that together needs to be in person. But how? How do we get motivated to get ourselves to come through those doors in person at the end of a week that has been way too busy and our energies are just way too low? How do we make time to be here when so many other things conspire to pull us away – like work, and family commitments and the chance, all too rare, just to sit at home and do nothing.

Let's return to this story of Jesus' encounter with the Cyro-Phoenician woman, a determined woman who knows without a doubt

that Jesus can and will make a difference in her life, and her daughter's life, if only she can convince him to do it. She knows who Jesus is and she knows what he can do for her. So she goes for it. She doesn't worry about all the reasons not to do it – barging into a stranger's house for one thing; approaching a man she doesn't know for another. She just goes for it, because she knows she needs to encounter Jesus in person, face to face. And then what happens? Ultimately Jesus does what she wants because he admires her for what she is – a brave, intelligent and determined woman who will not stop until she gets what she knows she needs. He admires her for her energy and her ingenuity! She bested him with his own argument. She had to think fast on her feet to do that. She had courage and determination, but she also had brains and the energy to use them.

This determination and courage are what it will take, we know, for our church to respond to God's call, for our church to thrive and grow stronger. This is what it will take for us, as God's people gathered in this place, to share the Good News, to embody what it means to belong to and participate in a family of faith making a difference in our own lives, in the lives of others and in the community. We know this. We also know that as we gather together here each week, we are nurtured in what it means to love and be loved unconditionally. This is where we explore God's unconditional love for us through Jesus, God made flesh, who lived as we live now. This is where we experience the Holy Spirit, giving us the inspiration and the energy we need when we feel like it's all gone. This is what church is all about, dear ones. This is why it matters to be here in person, at least some of the time.

This is a lot to think about, I know. It marks a change in our perspective on things which we were forced to re-evaluate and revise when the Covid pandemic blew everything about the way we live our lives out the window. Dear ones, we are still learning how to recover from that vast, collective trauma. We are still healing, figuring out what

our answer to the question “now what” needs to be. We are still healing, just like the woman’s daughter. The Cyro-Phoenician woman knew what healing required. First and foremost, it required Jesus. In person. That knowledge is what she acted on. It’s why she did what she did. May we be able to celebrate her strength, courage and determination to do the same. Amen.