

August 17, 2014
Isaiah 56:1, 6-8
Matthew 15:21-28

A Lesson from Dogs

Today we continue our faith and anatomy lessons. So far we have learned that faith is connected to our stomachs. And following Jesus means letting the suffering of the world hit us right in the guts. We have also learned that faith is connected to our hearts. And that following Jesus means taking heart and having courage in the storms of life. And today, we learn that faith is connected to our brains. And that following Jesus means we are always learning and discovering more about who God is. Our minds are always engaged. We are disciples, after all. The word disciple in Greek means student or learner. So that means, as disciples, learning is precisely what we are meant to do.

We need our brains as disciples. But sadly, there are some disciples of Jesus who don't believe we should use our brains. Having faith, they say, means that you do not think, you just believe. The bible says it, my church preaches it, and that settles it. There is nothing to think about.

There's nothing to consider or reconsider about the Bible or about God, and who is in and who is out, and what is black, and what is white, it's

all been settled. There is nothing new to discuss. Don't think. Just believe.

Except that that's not what Jesus teaches his disciples. In the Bible, Jesus is constantly showing them that they have more to learn. Jesus is always challenging them to think. He is always making them look at the world differently. He is always asking them look at scripture differently. And in the process, he is always upsetting the Pharisees and the other religious folks who are sure they have it right already. Jesus teaches his disciples again and again that they have to be ready to learn. Their minds need to be open. Because God is always doing something new. And because every now and then, even Jesus himself has something to learn. In today's story, Jesus and his disciples are in the district of Tyre and Sidon. And if we are using our brains, we might wonder why Jesus and his disciples are up there. Tyre and Sidon are not in Israel. There are not many Jewish communities for them to visit. Tyre and Sidon are, in fact, right smack dab in the middle of pagan country. This is the ancient and historic home of the Canaanites and their god Baal. So it is puzzling that

Jesus and the disciples are there. And what is even more puzzling is that they are upset when a Canaanite woman approaches them.

Now maybe they what they're upset about wasn't that this woman approached them. Maybe it's that she was shouting at them. No one really likes to be shouted at, after all. But it's not like she's shouting insults, or shouting at them to get off her lawn. She is shouting for help. "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David, my daughter is tormented by a demon." The Canaanite woman comes shouting at Jesus for help. Help my daughter. Have mercy on our demon-possessed situation. "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David." All she is shouting for is for help. But to our shock and amazement, Jesus does not respond to her. He does not help her. He does not have mercy. Jesus ignores her. So she keeps shouting. And Jesus keeps ignoring. And this goes on until the disciples have had enough of all this nonsense, and they ask Jesus to get rid of her. No mercy from the disciple side of things either. So Jesus says, in order to resolve the matter, "Look, I'm sorry, lady, but you aren't my problem. I'm here for the people of Israel." So finally, the Canaanite woman blocks Jesus' way. She kneels in front of him and desperately

demands his attention: “Lord help me.” And Jesus says to her, “It’s not fair to take the children’s food and give it to the dogs.”

When I think about this story, I struggle to make sense of it. I struggle with Jesus refusing to help this woman. I struggle with him appearing not to care about her and her daughter. I struggle with him calling her a dog. I struggle with this story because Jesus sounds like such a jerk.

Because he could say the word and heal this poor, afflicted woman’s daughter. But instead he chooses words that are dismissive and insulting.

Jesus calls her a dog. He does not identify her as a person made in the image of God. She is a dog. To him, she is an animal, a lesser creation, undeserving of his attention. She is a dog. She is outside of Jesus’ messianic mission, so she does not matter.

Jesus calls her a dog. And to us, that’s a little offensive because we like dogs. To us, dogs matter. Our dogs are family members. We walk our dogs and play with our dogs and sleep with our dogs. We groom our dogs and paint our dogs’ toenails. We feed our dogs healthy and highly scientific dog food. We buy toys and pillows and Halloween costumes for our dogs. We teach our dogs to do silly things like ride skateboards

and balance snacks on their noses and say I ruv ru. Because we love our dogs.

But dogs have not always been so loved. And even today, in some places, dogs are just street animals. They run wild. They eat whatever they can scavenge or steal. They must survive fleas and dog fights and bad weather. They are no one's pet or family member. They live in the alleys and on the garbage-dump margins of life. Those were the dogs of Jesus' time. Maybe a rich family kept a pampered pup. Maybe a family of laborers had one out back, like a barn cat. But most dogs were street dogs. At best, they were ignored. At worst, they were exterminated.

Dogs were not generally loved by anyone. So we know when Jesus calls this Canaanite woman a dog, he is not giving her a compliment. He is calling her and her daughter mangy mutts. And biblically he has every reason to do so. Biblically, he is in the right. Biblically, Canaanites are the mutts in the story of God. They are despised enemies of Israel. And they are not part of the mission of the Messiah. And so, it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.

Jesus, who has told his followers to love their enemies, has no love for this woman. Jesus, who has healed thousands without checking their Israelite credentials, will not heal this woman's daughter. Because she is a Canaanite. And the first Christians hearing these stories would have known what that meant. The first Christians were Jewish Christians. And the gospel writer, Matthew, knew that his Jewish Christian audience knew their Hebrew scriptures. They knew the story of Israel was their story. And in those ancient stories, the Canaanites never come off well. They were all descendants of Ham, son of Noah. Who was cursed for looking on his father's nakedness. Ham's son, Canaan, was father of all Canaanite tribes: Hittites, Jebusites, Amorites, Hivites, etc; all the tribes that were constantly fighting with Israel. The Canaanites lived in places like Sodom and Gomorrah, and we all know what happened there. Canaanite religion was always corrupting Israel. Remember Elijah and his dramatic showdown with the Canaanite god, Baal. Biblically, the Canaanites really were the worst of the worst. The lowest of the low. Biblically, they were the mangy mongrels in the story of God. So when a Canaanite woman comes to Jesus, shouting at him as

if she is allowed to shout at him: “Have mercy on me and my daughter.” I imagine that all of the disciples, including Jesus, thought, “No. Sorry, but I can’t help you. Demonic possession is kind of what you people deserve.”

If I think about it, the scripture makes an uncomfortable point. That the Bible can be used to reject people. That the Bible can be used to dehumanize and mongrelize others. That the Bible can be used to deny people mercy. And shut people out, instead of inviting them in. And that’s exactly how Jesus uses it. He uses his knowledge of scripture and his understanding of what the Messiah is supposed to do to deny her access to God. Because biblically, he can. Biblically, she deserves nothing. The Biblical story does not include her. God’s story is not her story. It says so in scripture. The children’s food should not go to the dogs.

But this Canaanite woman does not accept that. She will not let that be the end of the story. She will not let Jesus walk away. If she is a dog, then so be it. If she is a dog, she will beg like one. If she is a dog, then she will be a dog, if it means that her daughter can be healed. She will

suffer the insults. She will endure the abuse. She will take it all on for the sake of the daughter she loves. And in her humiliation and sacrifice, Jesus realizes something new about God. He sees grace that not even his disciples possess. He sees strength. He sees the spirit of love that goes beyond the letter of scripture. And Jesus learns something from this woman. He realizes in this moment that people like her ARE part of God's story. Because God's story is an ever-expanding story. He realizes that as the Messiah, God hasn't sent him to a tiny group of insiders, but to all who have been waiting outside for the scraps. He has come not for one people, but for all people.

Jesus learns something from the Canaanite woman. He learns that God's love is bigger and God's grace is bigger and therefore his mission as the Messiah is bigger than he imagined. The Canaanite woman opened Jesus' mind. And she was there to open the minds of those in the early church too. Their Jesus had come not just for them, but for all people.

And the Canaanite woman is there to open our minds as well. She kneels before us and asks us to look at her and at all the people who are despised as human beings who deserve God's mercy. To look at all

foreigners and strangers and enemies not as caricatures from some long-ago story, but as real people who have hurts and needs and burdens.

Who are afflicted by demons and who love their children and long to have life free of oppression. Surely even the dogs get the crumbs.

As disciples, our job is to always be learning. As disciples we are called to go out with Jesus into the unknown and the unsafe, into Tyre and Sidon and all the godless places where we assume God is not. And to meet those we assume they are not part of God's story. And to realize how they too are wrestling with the demons of this world. Just as we are.

The unhappiness and the loneliness and the empty, consumptive need for more and more. And then we introduce them to Jesus, who promises to put the demons away and give us new life in a new kind of family. A family in which there is no Jew or Canaanite. No male or female. No slave or free. There is just one people, who have experience the mercy of God. One family that stretches from one end of creation to the other.

Because there is no one undeserving and no one beyond God's mercy.

There is no one who does not matter. God's mission and God's story is

about taking back all of creation. May we learn that more deeply every day.