

GENESIS 45:1-15

PSALM 133

ROMANS 11:1-2a, 29-32

MATTHEW 15:(10-20), 21-28

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost; Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time
August 20, 2023; Year A

(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)

Barking Like Dogs!

You dog, you! And with those words, person's best friends everywhere were insulted in every way imaginable. Woof! Woof! But that is not nearly the worst of derogatory insinuations explicitly invoked in this disturbing story told by Matthew. In another story in which Jesus did not seem to be in the best of moods, perhaps having a bad hair day, we read the shocking, in some ways horrific, Matthean story of Jesus' encounter with a Canaanite woman, called a Syrophenician in Luke's companion account. We are so accustomed to Jesus' mercifully peaceful, graciously loving demeanor. We take for granted his open embrace of those who live on the fringes, welcoming the dispossessed, the disenfranchised and marginalized who live on the edges of society, inclusive of any and everyone who lacks in the social graces, the comforts we take for granted. Jesus even embraced the upwardly mobile, no one left out of his ever-widening circle. It is not just what Jesus does, but it is who he is, the core of his being rooted in "being", the very lovingly gracious nature, the very essence, of the transcendent God he espoused, sharing his concepts of the Divine with all comers and curious. Yes, we know that God is a lover, not a fighter! Yes, we know that Jesus had a temper, not necessarily a bad one, and that the rabbi could switch on his righteous indignation in a moment's notice. Jesus truly possessed the capacity to exhibit a

white-hot anger that no doubt was always burning within him, born of injustice he witnessed among his people on a daily basis. The rabbi's temperature could rise in a hurry, going from zero to a hundred in a nanosecond. We see that quick reaction in his indignant cleansing of the Temple, his agitation and frustration surely directed at the money grubbers who clearly had that whip coming. While images of Jesus gentle, meek and mild, are oversold, Jesus mean and nasty is just simply not on our radar. But let's be honest, we tend to block out those negative images when we think there is even a hint of them in a biblical text. The Bible tells me so.

In today's Witness from the Gospels according to Matthew, we read one of two versions about a woman, in this instance a Canaanite woman who comes to Jesus in need. Her daughter was obviously suffering from a mental illness, perhaps having a bipolar or schizophrenic meltdown, but known back in the day as being demon possessed ala the Exorcist. It is August and the horror movies are already being advertised! Can't wait! Obviously, she had heard that there was a man from Galilee in Nazareth, just like once upon a time there was a man in Israel. This unnamed, unknown, woman, so many of them, no doubt most, were anonymous back in the day. Perhaps she had heard the rumors, corridor talk, oh, if only there had been a water fountain, all that amazing gossip, the gist of which was that Jesus was an amazing, incredible, magical, wonder producing rabbi, a healer, a miracle healer, and that he cared, was compassionate, so radically attentive to the needs of the least and the last. That was the scuttlebutt, the hushed and covered word whispered on the street. Not being a Jew, no doubt this Canaanite child of God had tried all other avenues, surely this hyper-concerned mother approaching her religious shamans, her gurus, no doubt praying to her deities, but to no avail, nothing changed, her daughter still ranting and raving like a lunatic. Perhaps her daughter was an aspiring politician! Getting up all her nerve because she was on her last nerve, this pleading protective

parent seeks out Jesus, no doubt the rabbi rather easy to find. Just follow the groupies!

A little backstory to make this story all the more painful. Jesus had only recently fed the masses, if we are to take the Gospel's chronology at face value, if trusting in even a modicum of historically accurate order of events. For our purposes this morning we will do so, following the text like a yellow brick road. He had gotten a little respite before reengaging and was now teaching a lesson that all of us need to learn at some point lest our mouths be washed out with soap. Jesus tells them, "It is not what goes into the mouth that contaminates a person in God's sight. It is what comes out of the mouth that contaminates the person." Scary thought for me because I am not the son of a son of a sailor, Jimmy Buffett, but the son of a sailor and I come by my creative vocabulary honestly! Well, Jesus' implication to the Pharisees upset said Pharisees, as per usual. Nothing new to see here! Though Jesus' blanket condemnation of these religious leaders did disturb the always anxious disciples, who believed it was never a wise idea to poke the bear and tempt those in authority. They could recommend that you be put in jail or worse!

Jesus' response to the twelve was to tell them a riddle about the blind leading the blind, something we see on a daily basis. Jesus then, perhaps in frustration, inquires of their seemingly limited comprehensive abilities, asking, "Do you not understand yet?" The result, of course, of following those who are blind, figuratively at least, is that everybody falls into the proverbial ditch! Desiring an explanation, because sometimes these disciples were just confused, thick, not the sharpest knives in the drawer, the brightest bulbs on the tree, Jesus breaks down the riddle to its most simple interpretation, the least common denominator. The rabbi intoned, no doubt with emphasis, "Do you not know that everything that goes into the mouth enters the stomach and goes out into the sewer? But

what goes out of the mouth comes from the heart. And that is what contaminates a person in God's sight. Out of the heart comes evil thoughts, murders, adultery, sexual sins, thefts, false testimonies, and insults. . ." And Jesus' response to the down and out, desperate, all but hopeless, Canaanite woman, three strikes already against her—a woman, a foreigner, non-Israelite, a person of color—"It is not good to take the children's bread and toss it to dogs!" Oh, my! Nothing insulting in that innocent response! Houston, and all points elsewhere, we have a problem! No puppy love on display here! The man, carrying with him his own inherently bequeathed power, comes across as racist, sexist, and xenophobic, and all at the same time! The pot has called the kettle black! We have a conundrum because this just happens to be Jesus of all people! This is one of the hardest texts to interpret, the most difficult to comprehend, to remotely understand, yes, in all the Bible. These words seem horrifically strange, surprising, no shocking, coming from Jesus' lips. What to do? What to do? Where do we go from here? Well, we can choose to stick our heads in the sand, disregarding textual reality. We can choose to avoid or ignore the blatant content portrayed in this story. We can gloss over these words thinking surely there is something missing, that this is not what Jesus said or meant. For some, it is necessary to conveniently make an exception here as to taking the Bible literally or at face value. It is literal except, until it is not! We cannot have the Bible both ways or even our way, a veritable textual Burger King. It cannot be believed only as a matter of convenience when it suits our theological fancy. Or we can take a page out of the Jacob wrestling with God playbook and we can fully engage, to struggle with this twisted tale. I choose the latter!

As I have heard this text taught and preached through the years, much of the time listening from the suffocating confines of my conservative upbringing, there have been two standard approaches to explaining, really explaining away, this text, all designed to defend Jesus' honor, his sterling but perceived fragile reputation. The first

excuse used to protect Jesus' pristine image is to suggest that Jesus was merely, thus indicating innocently, making a polite joke at this desperate woman's expense in her desperate plea to save her daughter. Yes, Jesus is always making a joke at the expense of others. That is surely who Jesus is! Down Fido! Down Spot! Just imagine. Imagine all the racist jokes that all of us have heard throughout our lives. As a child from the south more of them than I could count, more than I could ever remember or forget. Think of all the sexist jokes used to keep women in their proverbial place, giving implied, subconscious, permission to grab them and dehumanize them, making them less than, less than equal, less than valuable, treating them as objects, yes, objectified as subservient creatures designed and made to please. Think of all the culturally insensitive comments that simmer beneath the surface but boil over when our nationalistic sensitivities are threatened, presuming our replacement at the top of the food chain. Yes, these injurious and unhealthy images, at least on this sobering day, appear to fit Jesus to a tee. Well, if the shoe fits. . . The next line of reason is equally archaic and that is that Jesus was testing her faith, intending to get a right response, right belief, interrogating her, sniffing for orthodoxy, for her to prove her religious prowess and spiritual ability. Folks, she was a Canaanite. Whatever faith she had you can bet it was not the faith of traditional Judaism. Her ancestors were Baal worshippers for Godsake! "Yes, Lord," showing far more respect that perhaps deserved, "but even the dogs," yes, the household pooch, "eat the crumbs that fall off their masters' table!" She would be nobody's lapdog! She would not be denied! Perhaps in her insistence, she came across to Jesus as barking like a dog! Interestingly and perhaps ironically, her faith, whatever it was, got her what she so urgently wanted. Oh my! And the big oak tree falls in slow motion! Game! Set! Match! Ballgame!

I love this story for so many reasons. For one thing it shows Jesus' humanity, suggesting perhaps flaws included, yes, a side of him that is

all but forgotten or never allowed when we theologically recreate him as perfect, sinless in every way. While we do not deny we tend to disregard Jesus' humanity. We diminish the Jesus of history and elevate the cosmic Christ of the Church. Balance is needed and necessary! This story offers a gift, the baseline reminder that, when we are honest, we all struggle to manage, always hoping and praying and working to overcome our faults, our indiscretions. All human beings are prone to err, yes, are predisposed to biases, prejudices, stereotypes, the negatively reinforced influences of our ethnically and racially motivated proclivities. These obstacles to our fully human humanity are painfully inherent in the collective DNA of our survival gene, a reactionary trigger spontaneously motivated by protection, defense, of tribe and clan. It is often our often-kneejerk reaction to circle our own wagons, indeed a protective mechanism innate to the human creature. I have spent a lifetime unwinding the string that tied me up in my childhood, binding me in ways that stunted my early evolution and growth. Developmental ability, our personal and collective growth and evolution, is always a necessary aspect nudging our humanity as we seek to become better at both our human being and doing. On a certain day, once upon a time, a humble human being of the most modest means who just so happened to be a foreigner, a person of color, a woman, serendipitously, unexpectedly, became, on the spot in real time, Jesus' mentor, his rabbi, a teacher whose wisdom on that day in that moment far surpassed the master's. I am convinced that this free exchange, honest and painful in every way, was a bellwether event on a bellwether day. Yes, for much, if not most, of Jesus' three-year ministry and mission, the rabbi truly believed that he was sent solely to the Jews, to those he dutifully called "the lost sheep, the people of Israel." This narrow, proprietary, belief was a perspective engrained from childhood. This sense of being selectively chosen was the assumption built into the Jewish tradition, a Judaic system steeped in history and structure, the implications read in the law and the prophets. This was a religious and

national paradigm that had long been reinforced into the psyche of every Kosher, Torah observing, faithfully Judaic follower. Jesus was a product of his religious tradition!

You must remember that all these Gospel words from all four Gospels were written after the early Church had emerged from within the ranks of its proud Jewish roots, first a sectarian movement within Judaism and then a religion all its own. The schism was permanent and painful, an unfortunate legacy remaining until this day, a trail of tears left in the wake of antisemitic rhetoric and violence. In this dialogue, this debate between a Canaanite called canine, we are privy to the expansion of the early Church from its traditional and its sectarian movement within Judaism to the full hospitable welcome and inclusion of Gentiles. Did Jesus really have this to say on this day? Did the rabbi truly have his comeuppance at the hands and words of a supposedly lowly Canaanite? Did this happen? I would not be surprised that it was and is so. Think back in your lives at the times, or perhaps that one searing time, when you had your most sobering moment, when someone or something of such profound import, an individual garnering such immense respect, penetrated your being forever, in a profound way that you knew from that moment on, from that day, that you would be changed, that you would never be the same, permanently altered in a way that significance does not even begin to describe. We have all been there! I remember mine in college as if it were yesterday or even today! Thank God that on a certain day a Canaanite came to Jesus with her most humble request, a need that for her was the most major problem confronting her challenging life because it affected the health of her daughter, her own flesh and blood. Nothing interrupts or interferes with the love of a mother for a child! And yet on this day, at this time, in this sacred moment, Jesus had a bigger problem to be resolved than her or her daughter!

Every day we may, just might be blessed, perhaps privileged, with the opportunity, the rarest opportunity, to have a minor, or perhaps major, impact on another human being, impacting their life in the most profound of ways. We may not only make the difference, but be the difference, in someone's life, yes, which in turn changes the world, right then, right there. Of the myriad reasons we are in relationship, that we seek community, beloved faith community, is that, if and when we are genuine, authentic, leading with our integrity, we all will make each other better people. We cannot live in a vacuum, surviving in some protectively isolationist cocoon. It is not our nature, not our design, not who we were and are created to be. The good news about this graphic story from the Gospels is not that Jesus certainly appeared to err on steroids, that he got it wrong, blatantly, embarrassingly, even shamefully so, that he revealed his worst, even perhaps a bit humiliating, self that day, but that he pivoted, he learned, he literally had a come to Jesus moment and was changed in an instant forever. There would be no going back. From this moment, from this conversation, from this day forward, Jesus knew in his heart and mind, deep in his soul, singed into his spirit, that the eternal message of God's graciously abounding love was indeed so generously poured out on all flesh, yes, was indeed, meant for every human being created in the image of God and that includes every color, every shade, every multicultural manifestation, men and women and those who identify as everything in between or not! Jesus got it! We all should get it! If Jesus was willing, so should we, what would prevent us? The world must get it! It is our task, our job, to get and give it! It is never too late to teach an old dog new tricks! Arf! Arf!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains and calls all of dogs to feast at the table, leaving the crumbs behind! Amen and amen.