

North Kildonan United Church

5th September 2021 ~Rev. Don Johnson

“Those Who Are Generous Are Blessed”

Proverbs 22: 1-2, 8-9, 22-23

Mark 7: 24-37

Gracious God, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that we may hear your Word with joy. Amen.

Every so often the gospel stories present us with challenges to our understanding of who Jesus is and what is his mission and message. Today's gospel is one such story.

Let's hear it again: *“From there Jesus set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.*

Jesus said to her, ‘Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.’ But she answered him, ‘Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.’ Then he said to her, ‘For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.’ So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.”

At first glance it seems like such an odd story. Odd and more than a bit perplexing. Usually in the gospels, when Jesus is approached for help or healing, he treats the request, and those making the request, with respect and compassion. But here, he basically calls the woman and her daughter, and perhaps by extension, all Gentiles, he calls them dogs. In that culture, as in our culture, to call someone a dog is not the language of endearment or respect or compassion. When you want to insult someone, you call them a dog, and I will leave it to your imagination to determine what that nasty word for dog might be!

In our culture we love dogs, but we don't really want to be called one. In the culture of Jesus's day, dogs were not the cuddly companions we have made them to be, they were not animals to be fussed over and fed special diets with lots of treats, pampered with their own comfy beds and all manner of toys to keep them amused. In the first century, dogs were kept only to work, and if they weren't working, they were merely tolerated or shooed away. A dog's life in those days was not easy, and hungry, desperate dogs wouldn't hesitate to steal any food they could get away with, even if that meant running away with the lamb chops meant for a family's table. Well, in that regard, even well fed dogs today might not hesitate to run off with a delectable cut of meat left within their reach. Perhaps some things never change.

So we have a mother in obvious distress, worried sick about her seriously ill daughter. And when she comes to Jesus for help, he enters into a verbal sparring match with her, a debate as to who is worthy to receive grace and healing.

He tells her, basically, that the time is not right for his attention to be turned to Gentiles. This is not welcome news for a mother frantic for her daughter's healing. *"Let the children be fed first"* could be Jesus's way of saying that his mission is to his own people, to the Jews. The mission to the Gentiles will come later. *"Just wait your time, and I'll get around to you,"* Jesus basically says to her.

We do that all the time with dogs. When I had my two dogs at home, I did that with them. *"I'm in charge and I'll get around to you when I get around to you"* was my attitude, although most of the time, if the truth be told, they got what they wanted when they wanted it, without much waiting.

I remember one time when it didn't happen quite like that. I was busy in the basement and one of the dogs, Hansen, was outside and Wilfred, the older of the two, was inside, at the back door. They were both miniature dachshunds, three years apart. Uncle and nephew actually. Hansen was an outdoor dog, always wanting to be in the fresh air and ready to express his displeasure at anyone who came near the yard. Wilfred was more of an inside dog, always ready to curl up on the chesterfield or chair, while his nephew Hansen worked on his suntan in the back yard.

I was busy, and Hansen was fussing about something, because he was always fussing about something, and Wilfred wanted to add his opinion to the situation. So Wilfred began a slow, regular bark for me to come upstairs and let him out. I'm busy, I thought to myself, but Wilfred didn't care, he wanted to go outside. The battle of wills began, but he eventually stopped barking and resigned himself to wait for me. I won that round, one of few victories over the years.

We treat dogs that way. We want them to fit into our schedules, our timelines, our plans. Sometimes they will offer resistance but most times they are just happy to be with us and to fall into line with our plans. In a sense Jesus wanted this woman to do the same thing.

Jesus was on a much needed break from the busyness of his ministry, from the demands of the crowds; he was somewhere where he didn't want to be known-he was off for a bit of rest and relaxation, away on a long weekend, perhaps a sort of Labour Day weekend. And no sooner does he turn off his cell phone and unpack his bag, and this woman comes to bug him.

Perhaps Jesus thought to himself: *'It's not time for healing Gentiles-the mission to non-Jews will happen, but not quite yet. I don't have time for this. I just need to be left alone for a while, to recharge. Shoo, be gone with you.'*

But she won't be gone, she won't give up, she has a sick child and she knows, she hopes, she believes Jesus can help. And perhaps she knows, or at least guesses, that the power Jesus has does not need to be carefully doled out to just a few, perhaps she

realizes that since this work that Jesus does is from God, then this work does not need to be limited. Just as there were leftovers after 5,000 people were fed with a bit of bread and some fish, so too there is so much food on the children's table, food to spare, that lots of crumbs fall to the ground, crumbs that dogs like her are happy to have. Perhaps this Gentile woman's role is to remind Jesus of that very fact. *"Reach out to the children of Israel, Jesus, but don't forget the rest of us, us Gentiles who are people, not dogs, who also seek healing and grace."*

Well, it seemed to work. Her appeal got through to Jesus and by the time she arrived home, her daughter was restored to health. She had come to Jesus for a blessing, albeit for her daughter, and she was not going to leave until the blessing had been granted to her.

It's a bit humbling to be called a dog. In the Communion prayers of an earlier time, this story is echoed when the minister says: *"we do not presume to come to this thy Table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table. But thou are the same Lord, whose property is always to have mercy..."* This, the Prayer of Humble Access as it is called, was included in the 1969 Service Book of the United Church of Canada, and I dare say we could not get away with using such language nowadays, although that might make for an interesting discussion for another time, because there is much more to this prayer than we see at first glance.

So what might we take away from this gospel? Well, the mother persevered until she had received a blessing. She would not take no for an answer, and in her desperation she tried everything she could. How many saints of the church have done great things because they would not take no for an answer, because they kept going, in spite of the arguments to the contrary, the rejections, the putdowns, the being treated like a dog. And yet, they kept on, until the work was done and the blessing received.

In our present day, we see the tragedy of human beings being treated like dogs, or worse, almost all the time. With the change of government in Afghanistan, for instance, so many people are in fear for their lives, people whose only offence was to serve as translators to Western military personnel. We can only imagine the terror they are experiencing, wondering when the knock on the door will happen and they are pulled from their families and their homes to face a very uncertain and grim future.

History is full of accounts of injustice and cruelty when society is divided up into the good and the bad, when groups of people are seen as the enemy, treated as though they are less than human, undeserving of basic human rights, regarded as animals to slaughter, when life is regarded as cheap and near worthless.

But mercifully, not all people go along with such twisted deeds and thought. Down through the centuries and to this day, there are those who stand up for the poor, the oppressed, the vulnerable; people who take seriously the moral demand to love our neighbour as ourselves, to embrace the words we heard from Proverbs:

“Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity, and the rod of anger will fail. Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor. Do not rob the poor because they are poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate; for the Lord pleads their cause and despoils of life those who despoil them.”

Even more significant perhaps are the opening verses: *“A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favour is better than silver or gold. The rich and the poor have this in common: the Lord is the maker of them all.”*

All of us share a common humanity, yet our conditions in life are determined to a great degree by our place of birth, as well as by politics, race, power and greed. Such combinations can create tragedies and innocent people are often caught up in the chaos of such forces. So we need to remember that those people we see on our TV screens and newspapers are not dogs, they are human beings caught in circumstances beyond their control, deserving of our generosity and compassion, needing our help.

On YouTube, my favourite cook is Rick Stein, an English restaurant owner. He often sets his programmes in other countries, where he is willing to learn from local people how to cook their food, as well as discover their customs and history. In one show set in India, he attended an annual appreciation dinner held on a huge plantation. All the staff and the family who own the plantation all ate together, all sitting together on the ground, from the rich owner to the youngest employee. Together they patiently waited for their rice and curries and other vegetarian dishes to be served to them on large leaves. Those leaves, with any food bits stuck on them were then gathered up and fed to the cows.

As they ate together, the very dignified owner of the plantation sat with Rick and she said how sitting on the ground was a great leveler of class distinction. There was not rich or poor, some in fine chairs and others in the dust; they were all together, sitting as equals, sharing the gift of food with each other. All welcome at the table. It's no coincidence that heaven is often described as a banquet where all are welcome and no one is left hungry. Whenever we share what we have with friend, stranger, refugee, then the kingdom of God comes just a bit closer, and God's will is done.

Or as the proverb says: Those who are generous are blessed.