

Dog-like Faith

Mark 7:24-30

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based on a message by Pastor William Cwirla

She appears every night at the dinner table. She's not allowed to sit at the table, with the rest of the family, but she's still welcome. Who is she? The family pet dog. Why does she show up? Crumbs of food are likely to fall from the table, and she's eager to receive whatever comes her way.

Today, *another* shows up at the table. *God's* dinner table. She's not part of the immediate family, but she shows up, eager to receive whatever her gracious Master has to give.

She's desperate. She has no one to turn to. Her daughter is deeply oppressed by some sort of demon. Imagine that! This mother is at the end of her rope. At the end of her hope. Jesus is all she has left. Ever been there? She hears that Jesus is coming into her region, the district of Tyre and Sidon, the far north coast county named after the great grandson of Noah. Canaanite territory. Lebanon, today.

The Canaanites were the inhabitants of the land, before the Israelites came. They were the people the Israelites were supposed to have driven from the land, but didn't. Needless to say, Israelites didn't have much to do with Canaanites. The rabbis even called them "dogs," which was about as low as it got.

This Canaanite woman comes up to Jesus. Strike one. Canaanites don't come up to Israelites, unless a fight is about to break out. She's a woman. Strike two. Women don't approach men, much less rabbis. She cries out to Him. Strike three. Women are not to address men in public. But Jesus is her last resort. She knows who she is. She knows who Jesus is. She's a Canaanite; He's an Israelite. So she does her best Israelite imitation: "*Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David.*"

"Son of David" is Israelite talk; messiah talk. "Son of David" is what the Israelites were looking for in a messiah. Perhaps Jesus wouldn't notice who she was. Perhaps He wouldn't care. Perhaps He'd be sympathetic and compassionate.

This woman's little girl is demon-possessed and suffering greatly. What's a mother to do? What *could* she do? What would *you* do if *your* little girl was possessed by a demon? What *could* you do? Most likely, this woman has already tried all the various remedies to try and cure her daughter. Maybe sacrifices, or prayers to the pagan gods of her land. Maybe certain ritual cleansings or special potions. All of which had proven to be absolutely useless.

Like this mother, how often do we find ourselves in impossible circumstances? Desperate circumstances, outside our control? Health related issues. Relationships. Finances. Even demon oppression. We've come to the end, and we're completely powerless to do anything. Desperate for help!

And so, this mother cries out in desperation, "*My daughter is severely oppressed by a demon.*" "Help me!" What would you have expected Jesus to do? Most of us would have expected Jesus to heal the woman's daughter. He'd done that for others, including non-Israelites. But Jesus does what? Her remains silent. He doesn't say a word to her. Doesn't even acknowledge her presence.

And so, she turns to his band of disciples. Maybe they had some influence. Have them put in a good word for her. "Please, please talk to Jesus for me. Tell Him my daughter is sick. She has a demon. I *know* He can heal her. Please, talk to Him for me!"

But the disciples are Israelite men too. Same three strikes against her. And so, instead of interceding for her, they beg Jesus to get rid of her. "Send her away, she's such a pain. She's causing a scene. She keeps on crying after us, Jesus. Tell this Canaanite to get lost."

"*I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,*" Jesus answers. We've heard this before, in Matthew 10. *These twelve, Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel."*

Yet, from our text today, we see that everyone is invited to the Master's Table, even the outcast, even the enemy, even you. Jesus came first to declare salvation to the nation of Israel, the children of Abraham. The children of the Promise. Following His death and resurrection, the Good News was then fully carried to the rest of the world, the *adopted* children of the Promise.

"I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel," Jesus answers. Answers whom? The woman, or the disciples? It looks like Jesus is talking to the disciples, in her hearing. He's agreeing with them. "You're right, boys. This bothersome Canaanite needs to get lost, because I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Right?" "Yeah, Jesus. That's right. Messiah is supposed to clean up this place of people like her. You're pro-Israel. You're going to put Israel on the map. You don't have time for this Canaanite. So let's get back with the program, Jesus."

But she's desperate. She won't go away. She won't take silence for an answer. She comes and prostrates herself before Jesus, literally touching her forehead to the ground in deep humility and worship. And she loses all that "Son of David" talk, and speaks straight from a mother's heart: "Lord, help me. I'm desperate!" Ever been there?

This time Jesus speaks to her, directly. "*It isn't right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs.*" She's down, and He appears to kick her. How utterly cruel, heartless, uncaring, unsympathetic, unfeeling Jesus appears to be. If you were this mother, what would you have done? Leave in a huff? Find another savior? Tell Him off to His face?

What do you do when Jesus appears to give you the cold shoulder? When He seems to turn His gaze away from you? When He treats you like a dog? This hits hard on our sense of entitlement. We feel entitled to things. We think God owes us just for showing up and for trying hard.

As Luther said, "We easily say that we are poor, miserable sinners." The words come out of our mouths easily enough. But when someone dares to rebuke us for our sin, what do we do? We get all defensive, and self-justifying. "How dare you call me a sinner! Who are you to talk? Who are you to judge? Do you think you're better than everybody else!"

Even more so, when God treats us like the sinners that we say we are. "How dare, He ignore my prayers! How dare, He turn His face from me! How dare, He close His hand of blessing! I'm His child; I'm entitled. Is He God, or isn't He? Doesn't He care?" And in our unbelief, we get all bent out of shape.

What does the Canaanite woman do? She doesn't do any of that. Instead, she does something utterly remarkable and unexpected. She hears something in Jesus' words that the desperation of faith could grasp. Something that she could hold Him to. It was in that deeply insulting word "dog." And all she had to do, was admit, that *that* is who *she* was. A dog. And from that place, which seems to our eyes to be utter humiliation and disgrace, she finds the hidden blessing. "Yes, Lord, a dog I may be. But *even* the dogs, eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

And we can almost see Jesus grinning from ear to ear! "O woman, great is your faith!" What is it about her faith that stands out to Jesus? What is it about her faith that Jesus commends? The greatness of her faith was in its object. In humility, born in desperation, she looks to Jesus and takes Him at His Word, trusts in Him, even when it appears He's turned His back on her. Great faith indeed. Faith in a great Savior!

"O woman, great is your faith!" From that very hour, her daughter was healed. The demons are no match for Jesus. No big deal at all, really. Just a word will do it. "Let it be done as you desire." That's all it takes from the lips of Jesus. The demonic realm has no choice, but to obey Him. Even from a distance. "*She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone!*"

What do you do, when what you experience in life, doesn't seem to line up or agree with the Word of God? When what is happening to you even seems to contradict the Word of God? The Word which says that God will provide for you (Mt 6:25-33), but you've been in need for so long? The Word which proclaims that God will be with you always (Mt 28:20), yet you've never felt so alone? The Word which promises that God works everything for your good (Rom 8:28), yet so much of what you receive seems *anything* but good? (James Douthwaite)

In great desperation and with great hope, this woman comes to Jesus. And she gets ... *not what we expect*. Not, I'm sure, what she expected. Not what Jesus' track record indicates she would get. Instead, she gets the silent treatment. The Word she had heard, and what she was now experiencing, were two vastly different - and seemingly even contradictory, things.

But what does she do? She doesn't believe her experience. She doesn't believe whatever emotions are surging in her heart. Instead, she clings to Jesus. She clings to the Word and Promises of God about Him. That Jesus is *the Lord*. That Jesus is *the promised Son of David*. That He came to *have mercy on all* people. Including Gentiles. Including Canaanites. Including her. Including you.

And Jesus holds her up as an example of great faith. For this is what faith does - it clings to the Word and promises of God, no matter what. Even when our emotions and experiences and people around us tell us otherwise.

"You say that I am a dog. So be it. Give me the crumbs and I will be content with that." How different is that, from the world we live in - where we *demand* our rights and privileges, and what we want from God? And when He doesn't deliver? "See ya. I'm out of here!"

When all hope is gone, and you're desperate, what can you do? Hang on to Jesus and His words, even when it appears He's not listening to you, expecting to receive whatever the Gracious Master gives.

And so, the Canaanite mother receives the mercy she has come for; the mercy Jesus has come to give. Was it a crumb? Was it more? It didn't matter! Faith doesn't *measure* the gift, but *receives* what God gives, with thanksgiving. Faith doesn't measure the gift; it is the sin in us that measures gifts - comparing what God has given to others and what He has given to me; judging what God has *given* to me compared to what I asked for.

But just as we cannot trust our emotions and experiences, so too, we can't trust our judgments. What we think are mere crumbs, might be far more. Like children rushing downstairs on Christmas morning, one child receiving a small box and one receiving a very large box. And immediately, what happens? The jealousy begins - not even knowing what those boxes contain! How often we judge God that way; His gifts, that way; His love, that way?
(Douthwaite)

Dog-like faith. What's that like? It has a humility to it; looking to its Master, falling to its knees before Him, holding Him to His word-to His promise, thankful to receive whatever the Gracious Master has to give.

And you shall remember the whole way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not. And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna ... that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. (Deut 8:2-3)