

A Sermon by the Rev. Canon Jack Frederick Nietert on the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost, August 14, 2011 at the Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

Dogs at the Master's Table

Jesus left Gennesaret and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

— Matthew 15:21-28

Mark says of this same woman that she is of Syrophenician origin. (Mark 7:26) Matthew refers to her as a Canaanite. It's the same person, just a slightly different perspective in identification. For example: you are an American, you are a South Carolinian, you are a resident of the Lowcountry, who knows, maybe you are a damn Yankee. Name calling all depends on perspective.

I grew up in New York City. Chris grew up in Charleston. When we got married and moved to Kansas City, Chris' father called me a damn Yankee. When we moved back to Charleston, I became a sensible Yankee.

In Mark and Matthew's case, the description not only identifies her place of origin, it puts her in her place. She was less than a nobody. For example, if she had been present at the feeding of the 5,000, she would not have been counted as one of the 5,000. She was a pagan. She was socially and economically disinherited. She was "that woman" with no power and no rights.

In another sense she was free—totally free—because of all this. "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose." (Janice Joplin, *Me and Bobby McGee*) She had nothing to lose...except her daughter. I like to think that this woman was empowered and bold because of her great love for her child. She was nobody...but here was somebody, somebody who had a reputation for healing. And she had a child who was seemingly possessed by a demon—a child in need of healing.

The woman addressed Jesus as Son of David. She is aware of and used the Jewish messianic title, perhaps to add dignity to her request of a man she does not know but of a man with a reputation as a healer from God. And then the Scripture does a strange thing. It says Jesus did not answer her a word. He didn't respond, not a word, silence when confronted by her request.

Thomas Merton, a spiritual giant of the 20th century, a contemplative, writes, "It is in deep solitude and silence that I find the gentleness with which I can truly love my brother and my sister."

Jesus' silence may well be because he didn't yet know what to say. Well, when Jesus finally did speak it was as if he was rehearsing often spoken words, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

It is almost as if he was repeating the words to himself. And maybe he was...trying to see if what he'd been taught and learned and what he had been teaching worked under the current circumstances. Even the Savior of the world had to search his soul—he was truly human—and it is heresy to think that his Divinity gave Jesus instantaneous solutions and answers to everything. Jesus had to think through his responses and Matthew's readers recognized their Lord—he was a thoroughly Jewish as they were—and the thought was: you didn't talk to Gentile women and God didn't either. But this woman refused to be ignored; her need was great and urgent. And the disciples were unable to get rid of her and Jesus was unable to ignore her. She was not to be quiet, "Lord, help me," she says kneeling at his feet.

There are two ways now to look at what Jesus says next. One way is to see Jesus responding arrogantly and rudely to the woman as he comments about throwing food to the dogs, referring to her as a dog. I don't see Jesus doing that.

Actually in the original Greek, Jesus doesn't use the regular word for "dog," rather the word is "puppy." Thus I suspect Jesus is speaking with a degree of warmth and using Jewish words in almost a kind and humorous way. Looking at the woman and smiling, he might have phrased it, "Hey, it is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the puppies" and she responded likewise with a degree of humor and warmth, perhaps with a smile, a determined look, but a smile, "Yes, Lord, but the dogs do eat of the crumbs from the Master's table." She was asking for table scraps of compassion and probably, much to the disciple's puzzlement, Jesus responds, "Woman, great is your faith. So be it, as you wish," and the woman's daughter was made whole.

Well, what can we learn from the story today? It is Good News and it is Good News for us too. I want to suggest to you that the way in which Jesus is portrayed as changing his mind and learning new perspectives on his own ministry is a model for us as we seek to gain perspectives on issues pertaining to our lives and our ministries. Jesus' willingness to change and grow is a model for all of us.

Secondly, there is this boldness and strength of the woman's faith and her request. She was—in all humility—willing to take scraps of mercy that might fall off the table of God's great bounty. And, it was enough...her daughter was healed. Jesus answered her, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire."

In the *Christian Century* magazine some years ago, a woman wrote, "The day the Gospel went to the dogs was the day it came to us." We are some of the "dogs" who have received the good news of the Gospel. When Jesus opened himself up to mission to the whole world, he opened his church to the world.

Now we are to open ourselves to the whole world in mission.

Amen.