

Reminiscere, the Second Sunday in Lent
March 8, 2009

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✧ Jesu juva ✧

GOD'S DOGS Matthew 15:21-28

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

Being called a dog nowadays is not such a bad thing. Most people love dogs, after all. There are few things more adorable than a new puppy. A Dog is supposedly “man’s best friend”. If you are fortunate enough to have an easy carefree life you’re said to be living a “dog’s life”; and watching my dog eat, sleep, get petted all day long, I can see how they came up with that phrase. And, though it’s a bit out of date now, if things are going really well you might say “hot diggity dog!”

Sometimes being called a dog is even a compliment. I remember in the Peanuts cartoons Peppermint Patty calling Charlie Brown a “sly dog” for holding her hand. If you are tough guy or good at sports you might be called the “big dog”. And if you are doing well at work you may become the “top dog”.

Not so in the ancient Israel. While the Israelites certainly kept dogs, to be likened to a dog was not a good thing. They were useful animals at times to be sure, but they were not thought of very highly. In Proverbs a fool is likened to a dog because dogs will eat their own vomit, consuming again the very thing that made them sick in the first place. Those deprecating themselves might call themselves dogs in order to show just how humble they really were. And of course, the Lord calls his enemies dogs, saying of the unbelieving: “dogs have surrounded Me; the congregation of the wicked has enclosed Me.” To call yourself a dog was to humble yourself almost to the point of humiliation. To call another a dog was basically to liken them to an unbeliever and an outcast.

And yet today we hear Jesus likening a poor helpless mother of a demon-possessed girl to a dog. She, a Canaanite, has come to Him for help, knowing that He is the only one who can cast the demon out of her daughter; and finding Him, she cries out: “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David! My daughter is severely demon-possessed.” These do not sound like the words of an unbeliever and an outcast, but of a person of faith; and yet our Lord ignores her. She keeps crying out. The disciples urge Jesus to send her away, to basically do what she asks so that she will leave them in peace; but He replies: “I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Finally she falls down before Him in worship and pleads the simple words: “Lord, help me!” And then he likens her to a dog, saying: “It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the little dogs.” Now if there was any question that being likened to a dog was derogatory, this sentence makes it pretty clear. He is saying that she is not a child of God’s household, but an outsider, a foreigner, one undeserving of God’s mercy, a dog.

Now most people would get angry over such treatment and say: I have made great effort to come out here and see you! I thought you were my only hope for my poor daughter; but you are no Savior, but rather a cruel and heartless man. And to think the Jews have hoped for your coming. They are the fools! They are the dogs!

But not this woman. She does not strike back at Jesus. She does not leave in a huff. And she doesn't give up. Rather she says: "True, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their masters' table." Yes, I am a dog. But give me what a dog deserves from its master; for just a scrap of Your grace will save my daughter. And Jesus replies to her: "O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire." And St. Matthew tells us that her daughter was healed at that very hour.

Now why does Jesus call her faith "great"? Is it because she was persistent? Yes, that's certainly part of it. This woman lays hold of Jesus and will not let anything turn her away, not even Jesus Himself! And so we should also be in our faith. We should be persistent in our prayers, knowing that God has commanded us to pray and has promised to hear us. And when it seems He does not hear or is ignoring us we should hold on to those words of command and promise and keep praying, knowing that He is and must be faithful to them.

We should also be persistent in our faith in Christ's forgiveness of our sins. When the Law condemns you, when Satan tries to convince you that God will have nothing of you any longer on account of your evil deeds, and when your conscience burns so that you are certain that God must despise you and judge you, lay hold of the Gospel of Christ's forgiveness. This Word stands sure for all time. And you can say to these accusers, I hear you and what you say about me and my sin is true; but God's Word is greater than that; and He has declared that I am forgiven and am righteous in His sight for Christ's sake. Christ has taken on my sins for me. If you want to condemn someone, then go and talk to Him and see how just far you get with it.

But I also find greatness in her willingness to be called a dog by Jesus, and in her agreeing with Him. He says you are a little dog and she says "True Lord." Amen I am a little dog. Now you might be wondering what is so great about that. What is great about that is that agreeing to Jesus' assessment of her required her to give up all pretense concerning her self, her right to God's goodness, her worthiness before Christ. When she says "True Lord" she acknowledges that she is as nothing before Him. She has nothing to give to Him but her need. She lies prostrate before Him empty, seeking to be filled. And that is always the stance of Faith before God. Faith always prostrates itself at His feet, seeking to be filled with His grace. It is only pride that stands before God and says look at me, I deserve your blessings, look at how devoted I am, at how much I have suffered for Your sake, at how much I have done for others. And such pride is always struck down. Faith is humble. It says, God you have every right to condemn me and I am as nothing before You. Yet in Christ you must have mercy upon me, for He has died for my sins and for my salvation. You say that I am not a child but a dog, then give me what a dog gets. If I am not worthy to dine at your table, then give me the scraps that fall from it. If I cannot stand before you, then let your mercy descend upon me as I lie here hiding my face in penitence and need.

And this is not play-acting, as if God were some childish overlord who delighted only in seeing people grovel before his capricious will and power. No, the truth of the matter is that we are as dogs and beggars before Him. And that's not a bad thing. That's the way He wants us to be. He wants us to recognize our need and also to have faith, that is, to be in relation to Him as those who receive His undeserved kindness, to be holy beggars and dogs.

You see it was never God's intention that we should be able to stand on our own, either in terms of our physical needs or our spiritual needs. He has created us with needs that only He can fill. And He does fill them, providing for us all that we need for this body and life; and providing for

our salvation through Christ by the Gospel by which His life-giving Spirit is bestowed upon us. This relationship of master to dog, so to speak, is not the result of sin, but rather of created order. Now sin separates us from God, and in doing so increases our need exponentially. But man even in the Garden before the Fall stood before God as one who had needs only God could fulfill. Adam needed food; God provided it. Adam could not find a helpmate; God created one. When Adam took and ate the fruit offered by his wife, he rejected God as the giver of good things, taking for himself that which had not been given him to eat. It was as if he was saying to God, I am no dog. Rather I will be as you are. See if I will eat from your table any longer! I'll be my own man and my own god.

Well that didn't work out so well. He should have been more like the Canaanite woman in the Gospel lesson, who was happy being God's dog if that meant getting what she needed for her daughter. This is why Jesus says in the Beatitudes: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." and again "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled." And this is why in the Psalm 81 (:10) God says to us: "I am the Lord your God... Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it." And in I Samuel 2, Hannah sings of God: "He raises the poor from the dust. And lifts the beggar from the ash heap, To set them among princes And make them inherit the throne of glory."

So you see it is not such a bad thing to be a dog and beggar before God. For these He calls His holy people, and seats them in glory. Luther's dying words, found, scrawled in a mix of German and Latin, on a scrap of paper in his pocket, were: "Wir sind pettler. Hoc est verum." We are beggars. This is true. Now some people the thought of that depressing. Poor Luther, to have such a low esteem of himself after such a glorious and important life! But that's not it at all. This sentiment is what made Luther's life such a blessing to the Church of His day, and to us too! Luther got it. He understood. Before God we are all beggars and dogs, and that is as it should be. For God loves His beggars and treats His dogs very well indeed! For the scraps which fall from this Master's table are scraps that give forgiveness and eternal life.

And such should our attitude be as well. Let us learn from Christ's Words, from the example of the Canaanite woman, and from Luther and all others who recognized their need and found in Christ their hope and their salvation; who would not let go of Christ no matter what, but begged like dogs for His mercy. That is great faith! May our Lord instill it in us, that we who are but dogs before Him, may eat the scraps that fall from His glorious and blessed table. Amen.

✧ Soli Deo gloria ✧