

August 16, 2020 – Matthew 15:21-28

It goes without saying, there are a lot of differences between cats and dogs. We all know that. It seems like a pretty poor topic of research and study. And yet, our own Mizzou College of Veterinary Medicine, right down the road in the Columbia, has been doing exactly that. And what they've discovered is actually somewhat fascinating.

Because both cats and dogs have been selectively bred by humans for over 5,000 years. They are both among the oldest domesticated species on the planet. And yet, they've been domesticated for two very different reasons.

Cats have always been bred for appearance. Yes, temperament and personality play a small role. Nobody wants a cat that tries to claw your face off. But, for the most part, cats are decorative pets. They exist to be attractive.

On the other hand, dogs have been bred to be useful. Sure, their physical appearance may play a role. A big, shaggy St Bernard is going to do a lot better in the Swiss Alps than a short hair Chihuahua. But for most of history, people bred dogs for their ability to complete specific tasks. So now you have hunting dogs and sheep dogs and guard dogs and tracking dogs. Whose behaviors are genetically programmed into them.

The end result of all this is a reality that virtually every cat or dog owner knows quite well. Dogs can be trained. Cats cannot. Dogs are dirty. Cats are clean. Dogs like play. Cats like to sleep. Dogs have a master. Cats have a roommate. You just can't break 5,000 years of breeding.

So why all this talk of cats and dogs? Well, because our gospel lesson today hinges on understanding the role of dogs in ancient Judean society. Because already by that point dogs had been domesticated for upwards of 3,000 years. And it was commonplace to have one in your home.

But you didn't have dogs back then like you have dogs today. You might have a pet cat like that. Cats in middle eastern society were always a symbol of wealth and luxury. They were a decorative item in your home, to be pampered and groomed.

But dogs? Dogs were there to be useful. They may have been tame, but they were not really pets, as we understand them today. They were tools for hunting and shepherding. Weapons for the protection of your home and property. And Jews in particular considered them dirty, unclean creatures, that you only kept around out of necessity. Easily tossed aside and forgotten.

And so it's with this in mind that we have a rather surprising conversation between Jesus and a woman. Jesus has traveled to the region of Tyre and Sidon. Tyre and Sidon are cities a good distance from any Jewish area. They are outside of the borders of ancient Israel. Firmly Gentile cities.

Why Jesus is going there we can only speculate. But the fact that it says he “withdrew” to there may mean that he was looking to take a small vacation. He had been teaching and performing miracles nonstop for over two years now. He just needed a break. And since every Jew recognized him by this point, the best place to rest was a region without any Jews in it. Like that of Tyre and Sidon.

But even here, Jesus can't find a moment of silence. A Canaanite woman finds him and demands to see him. Now, the fact that she is described as Canaanite here is interesting. Because in this time period, Canaan as a geographic region no longer existed. Nor did being Canaanite as an ethnicity.

Which means that she must be Canaanite in religion. She worships the gods of Canaan. Gods like Baal and Moloch, Asherah and Mammon. Gods that demanded huge physical sacrifices, but also promised huge physical rewards. Rewards of wealth and good weather and happiness and fertility and security. The gods of Canaan promised to fulfill your every wish, if only you proved to them your devotion.

These gods had plagued Israel from the moment they set foot in the Promised Land centuries earlier. Drawing people away from the one true God in exchange for health, wealth, and prosperity. Tempting them even into despicable practices like human sacrifice and prostitution. All in the promise of luxury.

And this woman is one of their followers. It's no wonder the disciples want to turn her away. Not only is Jesus burned-out and in need of a break from the crowds. But this woman represents everything they despise anyway.

And, at first, Jesus seems to agree with them. She begs and begs to see him. But Jesus ignores her. She begs and begs some more. But Jesus says, "*I was only sent to the lost sheep of Israel.*" Finally, she somehow makes her way inside anyway. And she falls down at his feet, crying out, "*Lord, help me!*"

And he replies to her with an insult, "*It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs.*" I am the bread of life. I was sent to the lost sheep of Israel. To feed them my own body and blood for the forgiveness of their sins. And who are you? You're a Gentile. You're a worshipper of false gods. You're a dog. Begging for food from the dinner table. Begging for heavenly food that belongs to the children of God.

It's a patently offensive thing to say. Imagine if, today, some prominent pastor were to refer to Muslims as dogs. He'd be vilified for it. Imagine if a politician were to refer to some minority group as dogs. He'd be run out of office.

And it's tempting to try and make excuses for Jesus here. "Oh, he's just referring to her as a pet. As a cute little puppy, begging at the table. Right?" No. He's not. This is just as derogatory as it sounds. More so, actually. Because we have a lot better opinion of dogs today than Jews did back then.

But the woman, surprisingly, isn't offended. In fact, she agrees with him. "*Yes, it is, Lord.*" She says. "*But even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.*" You're right. I'm not one of the children of Israel. I have spent my life worshipping other gods. I don't belong at this table. But I'm here, and I'm asking anyway.

And Jesus replies with something interesting. He says, "*Woman, you have great faith!*" It's not an uncommon expression from Jesus. He says something similar quite often. To the woman who was bleeding, to the man who was born blind, to the leper on the road, he says the same thing every time, "*Your faith has made you well.*"

But there's something special about this case. Because every other time Jesus says those words, and others like them, he's talking to a Jew. Or, at least, a Samaritan. People who believed in the God of Israel. People who had heard him preach. And knew something about what he was teaching.

But this woman is a pagan from outside of Israel. She knows nothing about Jesus except two things: that he has the power to heal, and that he has mercy to do so. And she, knowing nothing else about Jesus, has great faith.

You see, that's likely the reason why Jesus ignored her and rejected her and insulted her. Not because he actually looked down on her the way the disciples did. But because he wanted to show her and to show them and to show us exactly what great faith looks like.

It doesn't look like someone who shows up in church every single Sunday. It doesn't look like someone who tithes exactly 10% every week. It doesn't look like someone who has a Christian radio station on in their car and a little chrome fish on their trunk.

I'm not saying those are bad things. They're very good and helpful things, at times. But if those are what define your faith, then you've missed the point. You might as well be chasing after Baal or Moloch or Asherah or Mammon. They're happy to take your money and devotion too.

No, great faith looks like someone who falls on their knees and says, "God, I'm a dog. I am unclean in thought, word, and deed. I am a sinner and I don't deserve anything from you. But I know you are powerful and merciful and abundant in your grace. And so I come to you asking for a crumb of your forgiveness."

And in response, he doesn't just give us a crumb. He invites us to sit at the table. As we do this every day. Sitting here in these pews to hear his word. Standing before his altar, to receive his body and blood.

We who approach God's throne of grace come to him as sinful dogs, worthy to receive nothing from his hand. But we leave that throne as his children. Children who are given the bread of life, from his powerful, merciful, abundant hand.

Not because of anything we did. Not because of how much we knew about him. But because we had faith in his grace toward us. Grace shown in the death and resurrection of his Son. That whoever believes in him might not perish but have eternal life.

If you believe that Jesus has the power to save you and you believe that he has the mercy to do so, then you have great faith. And the deepest request of your heart has been granted. Your sins are forgiven. Amen.