

# The Faith of a Dog?

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 18b) September 9, 2019

## Mark 7:24-37

<sup>24</sup> **And from there [Jesus] arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And he entered a house and did not want anyone to know, yet he could not be hidden. <sup>25</sup> But immediately a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit heard of him and came and fell down at his feet. <sup>26</sup> Now the woman was a Gentile, a Syrophenician by birth. And she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. <sup>27</sup> And he said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."** <sup>28</sup> **But she answered him, "Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."** <sup>29</sup> **And he said to her, "For this statement you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter."** <sup>30</sup> **And she went home and found the child lying in bed and the demon gone.** <sup>31</sup> Then he returned from the region of Tyre and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. <sup>32</sup> And they brought to him a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment, and they begged him to lay his hand on him. <sup>33</sup> And taking him aside from the crowd privately, he put his fingers into his ears, and after spitting touched his tongue. <sup>34</sup> And looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." <sup>35</sup> And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. <sup>36</sup> And Jesus charged them to tell no one. But the more he charged them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. <sup>37</sup> And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, "He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak."

## In the Name of Jesus.

*"Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs,"*

said the woman.

She knows what it's like to be covered in shame. She's a gentile, a Syrophenician. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? He's not her God.

She doesn't belong to the chosen people. She lives several days journey from Jerusalem; even if she could make it there, she wouldn't be allowed to step one foot inside the Temple. She's unclean. She lives out with the people who eat unclean food, worship unclean gods, and live unclean lives.

And does she even have a husband, or a family? She has a daughter, but that's more shame. The daughter is unclean, possessed by an unclean spirit. And we know how that happens. The Pharisees, those who spend whole lectures teaching the Law and how to live clean lives—the Pharisees teach how if you have a sickness, or if you are afflicted by the demons, it's because of something you've done, or maybe something your family did.

The Pharisees teach how to spot an unclean life, and how to clean your life up, if only you'll follow the rules.

What had this woman heard of Jesus? We don't know, not fully anyway.

She would've heard that he's a rabbi. She would've heard, surely, that he was baptized in the Jordan by the prophet John to be the Lamb of God to take away the sins of the world. These stories travel. She would've heard something of him healing a paralyzed man and forgiving his sin, of him healing other demon-possessed people, and she surely would've surely heard about how he raised to life the dead daughter of Jairus. But Jairus was the ruler of a synagogue. He was clean.

What good would that do her? An unclean woman, living among unclean people, with a daughter afflicted by an unclean spirit. Jesus is the holy One of Israel. What is she to him?

She's a dog. He says the bread is for the children at the table, not for the dogs. She knows exactly what he's saying. She's been a dog her whole life—one not given a seat at the table, one not given the family name. She's a Gentile, living an unclean life, and everyone can see it.

This is nothing new to her. She doesn't argue with the title. She takes it. She's a dog. *"Yes, Lord,"* she says, *"but even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."*

She addressed him as Lord. She's the unclean one, the one covered in shame, who's not even welcome in Jerusalem, she calls him, who is clean, the promised holy One of Israel, Lord.

And he doesn't argue with the title. He takes it. He's her Lord. "*For this statement,*" said Jesus, "*you may go your way. The demon has left your daughter.*" [Mark 7:20]

She is now clean. Her daughter is clean. To have Jesus as your Lord is to be clean, or else he's not clean. All those who belong to him are clean. *You are clean by my Word,* says Jesus. [John 15:3]

Jesus has brought her to the language of faith. A language not learned from the Pharisees, not from the Law, not from those who go around demanding clean lives—Jesus has taught her the language of faith.

*Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs from the table.*

And, Jesus:

*Go your way. For this, your statement, the demon has left your daughter.*

Faith is the receiving of gifts. Faith is to be standing in front of the Lord only to be given to.

Faith is to bring no works of our own to the Lord, no worthiness under the Law, no cleaned-up life that he can accept, and, coming only as a dog under the table, to know that to receive even a crumb from Jesus is to receive everything. For, as the Catechism says, *where there is the forgiveness of sins, there is life and salvation.*

In our life of faith, we receive all things as gifts from our Lord, receiving also the gift of being his servants to our brothers and sisters. While the Law would have us count up people's works and peg their lives as being either clean or unclean, in our life of faith we are given to receive all for the honor they have in the Name of Jesus.

**Listen, my beloved brethren,**

writes James,

**has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him?**

[James 2:5]

Faith is the life of gifts from the Lord, so that from our Lord we receive our neighbor as the one to love, our brothers and sisters in the Church as those whom we help and encourage.

St. Augustine, some 1,600 years ago, wrote about dogs in the church. He used this text of the woman speaking with Jesus. Augustine wrote:

*Some people, intent on severe disciplinary precepts, admonish us to rebuke the restless and not to give what is holy to the dogs, to consider a despiser of the church as a heathen, to cut off from the unified structure of the body [of the church] the member who causes scandal. These [teachers of discipline] may so disturb the peace of the church that they try prematurely to separate out the wheat from the chaff before the proper time, and blinded by this precept, they themselves then become separated from the unity of Christ.*

Augustine was teaching of how the church is given to be the refuge for those who are covered in shame. He says that those who want to protect the church from scandal and bad people are doing so by saying that you are not to give what is holy to the dogs. But Augustine is speaking of the Gospel, of the grace of Jesus Christ. He's speaking of people being in the church for the forgiveness of sins, with brothers and sisters in the church not looking down on one another, but comforting and encouraging one another in the Lord's gifts.

For those who want to use discipline as a mark of the church, Augustine is able to point us to the dogs under the table.

The marks of the church are (1) *the pure teaching of the Gospel*, and, (2) *the right administering of the sacraments for the forgiveness of sins*. If we want to find the church, we look for that, for sinners gathered to the gifts of Jesus. It's like finding a dog under the table waiting for scraps.

Because, to receive scraps from Jesus is to receive everything. The food he gives is forgiveness and life, it is rescue from death and the devil, it is eternal salvation. He is generous and abundant; his gifts are never partial.

The marks of the church are the teaching of the Gospel and the right administration of the sacraments. But keeping the church clean by rooting out those who are unclean, this is not a mark of the church, but of the Pharisees.

So, Jesus lets us rejoice in receiving his gifts as dogs under the table receiving crumbs. But the crumbs are life itself.

Jesus lets us rejoice in embracing our brothers and sisters with the certainty that Jesus has given each one the honor of his own Name, embracing one another as those who belong to Christ.

And Jesus lets us rejoice in the knowledge that when we are covered in shame, there is no better place to be than at the Table of Jesus, hearing him give himself in his Body and Blood and saying, *You are clean because of the Word I have spoken to you.*

**In the Name of Jesus.**