

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
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Sermon by Pastor Gary A. Pufahl
The church is for the dogs

Jesus left that place and withdrew into the region of Tyre and Sidon. ²² There a Canaanite woman from that territory came and kept crying out, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David! A demon is severely tormenting my daughter!”

²³ But he did not answer her a word.

His disciples came and pleaded, “Send her away, because she keeps crying out after us.”

²⁴ He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

²⁵ But she came and knelt in front of him, saying, “Lord, help me.”

²⁶ He answered her, “It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to their little dogs.”

²⁷ “Yes, Lord,” she said, “yet their little dogs also eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”

²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, your faith is great! It will be done for you, just as you desire.” And her daughter was healed at that very hour.

—Matthew 15:21-28

She may have once been a beauty queen, but I doubt she was looking her best when she came to see Jesus. Care lines may have accentuated eyes bloodshot from crying, making her face look like wrapping paper used one too many times. Her once silken hair was probably prematurely grey and natty. Who had time to look good when your daughter, your beloved daughter, was suffering from demon possession? Still, no self-respecting woman would have blurted out what this Canaanite woman did: “I’m a dog.” Yes, that’s what she acknowledged *after* Jesus himself called her that.

“Whoa. Wait a minute, pastor! Did you just say that Jesus called a woman a dog?” Yes, and you heard it for yourself when I read the Gospel earlier. What did Jesus mean by those words and the way in which he treated this desperate woman? Why would a woman say of herself: “I’m a dog”? That is the startling confession of a Canaanite Christian...but there’s more. “I’m a dog,” is also a crucial confession for you and me because that confession reveals something so critical. Let’s find out why that attitude is so important for us, and why the church is for the dogs.

The context of this account is significant. Jesus had just had a dialogue with the Jewish religious leaders. The Jewish leaders snubbed their noses at Jesus and his disciples. They looked down on Jesus and his disciples. They found nothing but fault in Jesus of Nazareth. Just think about that. The chosen people of God, the ones to whom belonged the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), the ones to whom were given all the promises, the covenant and the temple, they could see nothing in Jesus but a breaker of man-made traditions. The very people who should have been closest to Christ were most distant. So, what does Jesus do?

“Jesus left *that* place and withdrew into the region of Tyre and Sidon.” Tyre and Sidon were places of ancient paganism. Jesus left the land of God’s chosen people and basically went to a foreign mission field. And there he encountered a very surprising situation. **There a Canaanite woman from that territory came and kept crying out, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David! A demon is severely tormenting my daughter!”**

This woman was a Canaanite. You may remember that the Old Testament Israelites were supposed to get rid of the Canaanites because of their putrid pagan practices. But many of them survived so that this woman could trace her ancestry back to them. But she wasn’t like her ancestors. She didn’t worship the idol Baal and offer her children as human sacrifices as they had done. In fact, she sounded more Jewish than Canaanite when she called Jesus, **“Lord, Son of David.”** It’s obvious from the rest of the text that she wasn’t just copying something she had heard the disciples say. She really believed that Jesus was **“Lord,”** the Son of God. She honestly trusted that, as the **“Son of David,”** Jesus was the promised Messiah who had come to save the world from sin.

How did she know this? We’re not told, but she firmly believed this: no matter how Jesus responded, she believed he was the Promised One from David’s line. In line with this, she asked for Jesus’ “mercy.” **“Have mercy on me, Lord!”**

Mercy has often been described as God’s faithful love. It means to have compassion for someone who is suffering; to want to do something to help. This woman held on to the fact that the promised Messiah would be one of mercy. As the promised Savior who has come into this world to rescue fallen sinners, certainly Jesus would have mercy. Wouldn’t he?

“But he did not answer her a word.” Not a word. What was Jesus doing? Not only does he seem disrespectful, but he also seems cold and heartless, doesn't he? Is he snubbing *his* nose at this woman? Is he treating this woman in a way that he was treated by the Pharisees? In our Sunday morning Bible study we are discussing the importance of active listening. Jesus wasn't doing any of that, was he? What is going on?

Well, if you were that woman, what would you have done at this point? What would you have done when Jesus has seemingly ignored your most ardent pleas for help? Give up in disgust? Conclude that Jesus must not really care? Call him names and walk away?

This woman didn't quit. She continued to cry out to Jesus, not ashamed to pour out her heart in front of at least twelve other men, the disciples who must have shifted uneasily on their feet confused at their master's apparent continued callousness.

Finally, the disciples couldn't take it anymore. Hadn't Jesus recently fed over 5,000 people? Didn't he have compassion for people? He certainly has the power. If he can keep Peter on top of the water, he certainly could heal this mother's daughter. Why doesn't he do a simple miracle so that this woman would go away and leave them in peace? But look at Jesus' words: **“I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”**

Wow! How would that fly in America? What blatant discrimination! Are we sure that the church is for all people? Jesus isn't acting like it, is he? What did he mean he had only been sent to the lost sheep of the house Israel? Didn't God say otherwise in the Old Testament? Don't we have passages which talk about people from all over the world streaming to the light? What is Jesus doing?

But you know, come to think of it, I would imagine those words gave comfort to this woman. I mean, think about it. Jesus was just *with* the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And look at how they treated him. They scoffed at him. They despised him. They looked down upon him and his disciples. If the Son of God was still concerned about those stubborn sinners, well, there is hope for me! I imagine that Jesus' words actually gave her hope. These seemingly calloused words actually emboldened her to plead one more time, kneeling before him, **“Lord, help me.”** She didn't spend time recounting why her daughter needed the help. She fell at the mercy seat of Jesus and cried with faith in the Son of God, **“Lord, help me.”**

And then we come to the part of the story which seems so cold and heartless, wouldn't you say? Jesus turns to her and says, **“It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to their little dogs.”**

Boy, it sure sounds as if Jesus is having a bad day, doesn't it? He calls this woman a little dog. And what's even more shocking was the woman's response: **“Yes, Lord, yet their little dogs also eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.”**

There it is; the startling confession of a Canaanite Christian: “I'm a dog.” Did this woman have no pride, no self-respect? No, she didn't. And that's the point. That's what made Jesus marvel at her faith. Contrary to the religious leaders who were so arrogant and looked down upon Jesus, this woman came to Jesus with no self-worth, but in humility saw her identity as a pet in the house of Jesus her master.

Just think about that picture. Have you ever seen a dog beg for food? It's disgraceful. Our dog tends to start salivating at the mouth. Drool hangs from his mouth as he longs to have a piece of food. It's really disgusting and quite humiliating. So I push him away and tell him to go down. But he keeps on looking at me with those drooping eyes, drooling away. My dog has no self-respect, but he knows that I his master will take care of him.

And that's how God wants us to be. Don't be afraid to get on your knees and show some humility before God. Don't worry about whether your knees hurt or whether your clothes will be soiled or how uncomfortable you feel. Don't be too proud to bow before the Lord and ask for help. When you remember you were just a dog, you won't be too proud to beg God for some crumbs. But it's knowing from where the crumbs come that causes confidence.

With humble but confident faith this woman says, **“Yes, Lord, yet their little dogs also eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.”** She was saying to Jesus, “I'm not asking for the main course from you, Jesus. I'm not looking to take food from the Jewish people. I understand that you picked them as your chosen people through whom you would come. I'm not looking for all the blessings you have in store for them. All I'd like is one little scrap from your table.” She regarded this healing of her daughter from *demon* possession as just a scrap. And that's all she wanted, a scrap of Jesus' time.

How did Jesus respond to that? **“Woman, your faith is great! It will be done for you, just as you desire.” And her daughter was healed at that very hour.** Wow! What a lesson for Jesus' disciples! What a lesson for us!

All the while it looked as if Jesus was snubbing this woman, he was giving her room to be persistent, to exercise her faith! Through persistence Jesus agreed with the woman's reasoning and felt happy to give this little dog a crumb. He even went so far as to commend her faith!

But what was so great about her faith? What made her faith great? It was her humility, her persistence, her faith in the *mercy* of Jesus. Throughout all the rejection, she clung to the belief that Jesus was a merciful Lord. She didn't

demand that Jesus revolve his public ministry around her. All she wanted was a crumb. And this startling confession of faith from a Canaanite Christian is a crucial confession for you and me too.

Imagine if we started to have the attitude that we deserve to be here. What would God think if you came to church today thinking that you were doing him a favor by being here? How would God look at you if you prayed and lived life as if God owed you good health and wealth, that you somehow deserved your spouse and children because you've been a pretty good person? What would God think if we thought we were doing God a favor by being a part of the church?

Pride is deadly for a follower of Jesus. For as long as I hold on to my pride, as long as I think God owes me something, I will never treasure the gift of forgiveness God has given to me through Jesus. And I really am a little dog in need of forgiveness! I prove it every time I snap at the invisible hand that provides my daily bread. I'm a little dog when I snarl at God's directives for my life. I'm a little dog when I whimper pitifully when things in life don't go my way. And what scares me most, however, is how I rarely honestly admit that I am a little dog. More often, I think I deserve more. I think I deserve to be at the table eating from the banquet feast of God. I think that God is really fortunate to have me as a part of his family. Oh, the arrogance and pride!

Do you see yourself there, too? It's not about me proving to God that I am worthy of his favor. It's recognizing that I am in desperate need of his mercy. To fall before his mercy seat and cling to him in faith, recognizing that I don't deserve any good thing from him, but clinging to the fact that he is merciful despite me, that's what I need in my life.

"I'm a dog." It's a crucial confession for without it we will never eagerly desire the great gifts God offers and gives to all sinners. Oh, those gifts don't seem like much. Consider again the Canaanite Christian's experience. After marveling at the woman's faith, Jesus simply said to her: **"It will be done for you, just as you desire."**

Jesus didn't accompany the woman to her home and wave his hands over the demon possessed daughter. He simply gave his word that she would be healed and that was enough: her daughter became demon-free at that instant.

What miracle do you receive from the merciful hand of Jesus? How about a bite of bread and a bit of wine in Holy Communion! How about a middle-aged white guy of a pastor who announces that your sins are forgiven! Is that enough? Yes! For with these "crumbs," God connects you to the feast of forgiveness which Jesus purchased with the blood he shed on the cross. Don't despise Christ's crumbs because they alone lead to the heavenly banquet where you will no longer be lying under the table like a little dog only able to see God's feet, as it were. Instead as a son, as a daughter, you *will be* seated at the table, gazing directly into the smiling face of your heavenly Father.

And God is smiling on you even as I speak. It may not feel that way if you're enduring some crisis like the Canaanite Christian was. Your pleas for help may seem to be going unanswered. And life may have actually gotten worse since you increased your praying and Bible reading. What's Jesus up to at times like this? Thanks to this interaction between Jesus and this woman we now know. He's exercising our faith so that we will hunger all the more for his crumbs, crumbs that will sustain us little dogs until we will one day sit *at* and not *under* God's table. Sure, I'm a dog now and so are you. But we're *his* dogs feasting on *his* crumbs. Thank God the church is for the dogs. Amen.