

DOGS UNDER THE TABLE

St. Andrew's UC, Sudbury; September 6, 2009

Mark 7:24-30

It has a lot to do with geography, actually.
Although maybe that's a tad simplistic.
But there's no getting away from the fact that this woman
 coming up the road is a local
 and Jesus is not.

You can't actually see Jesus at this moment.
He's hiding out.
 Hoping no one will figure out where he is.
 He's kicking back on the patio at a friend's place
taking a break from the chaotic busyness of the past few days and weeks.
His schedule has been really crazy—
 starting with a hometown reunion in Nazareth
 that turned out to be somewhat less than homey;
 then there was the teaching and lecture tour
 and the commissioning of his cadre of twelve,
 not to mention the debriefing after *their* tour of service;
 following that, that huge catering gig on the other side of the lake—
 well over five thousand hungry mouths that got fed that night.
And the after-hours clinic—
 well, *that's* been going on for months now,
 people expecting Jesus to be available and ready to doctor 24-7.

So today—today Jesus is hiding out.
He's walked a long way to get away.
 All the way into the “region of Tyre.”
Maybe the geography will work in his favour....
Fewer Jews here, so maybe he can get some peace and quiet
 without folks running after him
 for food or the miracle touch or a listening ear.

As it turns out, that's just wishful thinking.
It's not only the Jews who have heard about Jesus.
His reputation has been more widely broadcast than he realizes.
Because, as I said a moment ago,
 there's a local woman coming up the road,

clearly headed this way—
to the house with the patio in the back yard.
She is moving with purpose, hurrying, head bent,
lifting up her linen skirt so she won't trip on it,
and she's turning in at the front gate.
I *told* you.

How do I know she's local?
Well, for one thing, what self-respecting Jewish woman
would come out on her own like this,
unaccompanied by one of her menfolk?

She has to be Canaanite—
Phoenician, some would call her.
And we all know what *that* means.
Bunch of heathens, that's what they are...
worshiping that demon goddess Ashtareth.
Do you know that it's not so long since these pagans
actually sacrificed their babies to their gods?!

Disgusting!
And look at her dress!
Those damn Canaanites—always showing off how rich they are.
Fine linen, good leather sandals, hardly scuffed at all
and lots of jewels—look at that, how can she possibly do any work
with all those rings on her fingers!
And obviously there's no scarcity of food in *her* pantry.

Well, here she is, at the front door.
I wonder if anyone's going to let her in.....

Eventually they ask Jesus to come in from the patio.
This woman is tenacious.
She simply refuses to budge out of the doorway.
Short of pushing her bodily out of the way
and slamming the door in her face, there's no way to get rid of her.
Jesus comes through the central hall
and looks at her.
Well, at the top of her head, actually,
because the minute she sees him, she falls down at his feet.
And now—oh no, she's starting to wail...
She's saying something about her daughter—

wait—yes, she’s saying that her daughter is deathly ill,
plagued by an evil spirit.
Well, what does she expect!?
You can’t be spending your day worshipping evil spirits
and then expect that your children won’t be affected!

Clearly Jesus doesn’t have much patience for her either.
He’s here to get away from the crowds,
not to add these pagans to his list of people to look after.
“Let the children be fed first,” he says,
“It’s not right to take the food for children
and give it to the dogs.”
And he makes as if to turn away and go back to his red wine on the patio.

Oh Jesus.
Oh Jesus.
What were you thinking, we wonder now,
here,
at St Andrew’s in Sudbury.
Surely our Jesus was not racist.
Surely not.

It feels sacrilegious to even say those words, doesn’t it?
I mean,
the whole reason we try so hard to overcome our own racism
is because we’re convinced that’s what God calls us to.
So what on earth is Jesus doing,
turning away from this Phoenician woman
and not just turning away but insulting her first?
Calling her a dog?

Oh preacher.
Oh preacher.
Where are you going with this,
you may wonder now,
here,
in this nice clean sanctuary that we are so glad to get back into?
This is ugly language.
This is beginning to make us feel squirmy.

I know.

And we have tried our best, over the years, to soften this text.
Some of us like to think that Jesus was meaning puppies—
you know, the cute cuddly kind.

A pet.

Not some mangy scruffy dog
scrounging for scraps on the floor.

I honestly don't know if Jesus would have encountered
pet puppies as he was growing up, but—

I know the Exodus dietary laws instruct the people
to throw food unfit for human consumption
to the dogs.

And dog is a term used in the Bible to refer to male prostitutes
and to the unclean, the despised, the enemy.

It's not pretty at all.

And it doesn't feel all that good
to think of Jesus being so.....rude? harsh? narrowminded?

It's disturbing

and it unsettles our understandings of Jesus as righteous and inclusive
and a good example for us to follow.

In fact, we may tend to enter the story more easily through the woman.
That may be where our natural sympathies land.

For all that a Galilean Jew

might have seen that woman coming up the road
as an insufferable reminder of the economic inequities
between Jew and Phoenician

and for all that a Galilean Jew might have been offended by
this woman's religious inclinations/traditions

and for all that this particular Galilean Jew named Jesus
was probably exhausted and maybe close to irritable—

for all that,

it's much easier to feel connected to the woman.

Partly because of her circumstances, of course.

We feel sympathy for this woman.

She is terribly afraid for her sick child.

A child so sick, so disturbed, that the mother had to leave her at home,
most likely in the care of household servants.

This woman must be sick with worry herself,
wondering every second how her little girl is doing
wondering whether she's screaming or whimpering or passed out.
And we admire the woman for setting out in her desperation and love,
heading to where she must know she won't be welcomed.
Walking alone.
Walking against time.
Walking to ask a favour of a stranger.

Yes, of course we can identify with her!
We're on her side.
Her need is so great, so deep....
Healing, our hearts cry out with hers—
give her healing, Jesus.
But no. Jesus turns away, and not so gently.

And then the woman does the unthinkable.
She breaks the rules of etiquette
and she argues back.
She gives Jesus some of his own medicine.
Imagine!
A woman talking back to a man.
A Canaanite being familiar with a Jew.
Throwing her head back, she scrambles to her feet.
"Fine, then!" she retorts, voice flinty and eyes flashing up at Jesus,
"If I'm a dog, then treat me like one
and give me the damn scraps off the floor!"

Oh woman.
Oh woman,
we think now,
here,
in this place of assumptions and safe Christianity
where we do not often have to die in the ditch to get what we want.
Where did you find the courage for this?
From whence this wisdom?

For wisdom it is.
Wisdom and the challenge from a brave heart that dares to name the truth.
Because—look!

Jesus has paused in mid-step.
He slowly turns back to her,
and there is an expression on his face that is hard to read.
His mouth opens and there is a pregnant silence
before the words come out:
“Oh woman,” (he says,) “Oh woman.
For *that*, you may go.
Hurry home to your little girl-child.
She is well.”

This story makes me wonder all kinds of things.
It raises more questions for me than it offers clear-cut answers.
But I’ve learned to be less discomfited by that over the years.
Indeed, the very radical nature of this text—
the fact that it makes us take another look at Jesus
through a less traditional lens—
that intrigues me.
It catches my attention.
And I find myself asking things like,
How *human* is our Jesus anyway?
Was this moment at the front door with this Canaanite woman
a kind of conversion experience for him?
How approachable is he,
this Lord who asks us to welcome *all* to the Table....
could it be that he understands us better than we may have imagined?

There is a theological tension for us in this.
This story gives us permission to ask:
Is it possible for Jesus to be *fully human* and *without* sin?
Perhaps Jesus struggles here to find his own integrity of faith and mission,
or, as one commentator puts it:
*Maybe Mark is showing us
that the incarnation is not a cakewalk (Feasting, 48).*
To be the Son of God, the messiah must suffer
not only at the hands of those who do not understand him
but also under the challenge of the human condition.

I find myself asking things like,
who are the dogs under *our* table?

Who are the ones for whom we reserve the scraps?
The ones we think not quite good enough to rub shoulders with....
The ones we think should be grateful to get hand-me-downs....

We're so insecure, aren't we?
We get so busy (we humans, I mean)—
 we get so busy making ways for us to feel that we are valued,
 that we have status,
that in the process other people get denigrated,
 shoved to the margins.
Other people who are perhaps more vulnerable.
Whose voices are not so strong yet.
Whose lack of economic or social or political power
 means that in this world they don't have much say.
In the time of Mark's gospel account,
 it was the poor, the disabled, the orphaned,
 the mentally ill, the women, the children, the alien,
who occupied the lowest rungs of the social status ladder.

But we don't need to make lists, do we?
We "get" the story.
For all our questions about this gospel reading,
 we *know* that it's about God's grace being for *everyone*,
 not just for a select few.
We know that the woman's words either remind Jesus
 or reveal to him
 that God's healing, God's love, God's promise
 are freely offered to all of God's beloved children.
The bread of life is extended to all.
There are no scraps in this story
 and there are no scraps in God's economy of grace.

Amen.