

Sermon for Proper 18 Year B (Sept 5, 2021)

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- You may remember that about 15 years ago, some people began wearing wristbands with the letters WWJD
- If you don't know about this, WWJD was a shorthand for "What would Jesus do?" and people used it as a reminder to think about how they should act as Christians.
- Jesus is, after all, our perfect example of what a Godly life looks like, and the Bible tells us we should be imitators of Christ.
- But of course you have to pick the right things to imitate – maybe Jesus would get across the lake by walking on water, but I shouldn't try that.
- And while I do happen to have a beard and wear my hair long, it isn't because Jesus is always pictured that way, and I've never taken to wearing sandals – imitating Jesus' *look* isn't what it's about.
- And if you're scouring the Scriptures for examples of what Jesus would do, today's readings might not be the ones you'd want to choose.
- Today's Gospels depict Jesus acting in some very peculiar ways – sticking his fingers in a deaf man's ears, spitting, and likening a Gentile woman and her daughter to dogs.
- Don't worry: When we're doing prayer and healing ministry during communion in a little while, I'm definitely not going to spit, or give someone a wet willie, and I'm sure not going to call anybody a dog.
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- I'm starting off with a bit of humor because these are some of the harder passages for Christians to deal with, and a real challenge to preach on.

- Now, some lessons are hard because they challenge us to do big things: like turn our lives over to God, and totally change how we live.
- Today's stories are hard for a different reason: this isn't the way Jesus usually behaves.
- Some of it isn't how we *want* Jesus to behave.
- In the first one, it looks like he's being callous and mean and even bigoted, and in the second one he is doing things that just seem bizarre.
- But sometimes the hard passages are also the ones that are most in need of good preaching.
- I'm not saying you're going to get that today.
- But a lot of sermons have been written about the first story – was Jesus really calling Gentiles dogs and trying to brush off a woman in need?
- Jews of that day did sometimes refer to Gentiles as “dogs”, and it wasn't meant as a compliment, so it's something you can imagine a rude Jewish traveler saying.
- But it isn't the sort of thing we tend to imagine *Jesus* saying at all, and it's hard to make it fit with our picture of Jesus.
- I don't have an explanation that takes all of the sting out of it, but I will share some of the things I've heard in other sermons and read in commentaries.
- On the one hand, I've heard some that try to soften it, so that it isn't really the insult it appears to be.
 - – they say that that the word is mistranslated, and really means something like “puppies” or “doggies” – an affectionate term for dogs that are part of a household rather than a derogatory word for the feral dogs that would have roamed the streets and eaten from the garbage.

- Now when I first heard someone say this, I was skeptical – it sounded like an unlikely attempt to make the story sound better.
- So I checked that out, and it's true – the word for dog in this passage is in what grammarians call the diminutive form, so it's *not* exactly the common insult, and Jesus is deliberately changing or softening it.
- So it is plausible that he's taking the kind of anti-Gentile insult that the woman might well expect to hear and changing it into a different metaphor.
- And part of the lesson here may be more for the disciples than for the woman.
- In Matthew's longer version of the story, the woman is following them around town and won't leave them alone – indeed, you might say she is hounding them – and the disciples beg Jesus to send her away, the way you'd chase away a feral dog that was following you around or trying to come in the door.
- But Jesus says, as it were, no, the Doggies are ultimately part of God's household as well, even if he's feeding the children first.
- And the "first" part implies that the Gentiles are to be fed as well.
- And maybe most importantly, this is what the woman hears and latches onto, and she persists with that memorable comeback which fills out Jesus's metaphor: when the children are eating, they drop food on the floor, and the doggies are allowed to eat it.
- And it is then that Jesus says, "For this saying you can go. The demon has left your daughter."
- Here, I think what we can learn from is not so much what Jesus did as what the woman did and didn't do.
- She's got an awful problem – her little girl has a demon tormenting her.

- She loves her daughter so much that she is willing to risk public embarrassment by hounding this foreign rabbi and his twelve friends asking for his help.
- Respectable women didn't approach a group of foreign men in those days, much less follow them around and get down on their knees to beg for help.
- At first, there's every evidence that she's being rejected and even insulted, and another person might have just gone away angry or ashamed.
- But her love and her faith make her persist – her daughter desperately needs help, and she's convinced that only Jesus can provide that kind of help, so she's ready to go great lengths to obtain it.
- She doesn't care what other people think.
- She doesn't care if she has to keep it up all day.
- She's willing to get down on her knees, and also to argue back.
- Would that we were always so persistent – so dogged – in praying for those we love and trying to get them what they need.
- Would that we were always so persistent in praying – and working – for what is right.

- But what is this about feeding the children first?
- The most common interpretation is that there were indeed two stages to Jesus ministry – first to the Jews, and then, after the resurrection, to the rest of the world.
- Remember that in the Book of Acts, Peter and the other Apostles are surprised when God reveals that they should be preaching the Good News to the Gentiles as well.

- And in John's Gospel (Ch 12), when some Greeks approach Philip asking for a meeting with Jesus, it's then that Jesus knows that the time is ripe for him to fulfill his mission by going up to Jerusalem to be crucified.
- But it's complicated: Jesus does work a number of miracles among gentiles, and this is not the first time he has done so.
- I've recently heard some preachers take the question further: did Jesus always know that his mission was to save the whole world, or did he start out thinking his mission was just to the Jews?
- In fact, in Matthew's version of today's story, Jesus says that he came specifically for the lost sheep of house of Israel.
- And if he believed this, perhaps it was this Syrophenecian woman who helped him understand that his ministry was bigger than he himself initially believed.
- If that's the case, this is really a pivotal moment in the Gospels, and in the life of Jesus.
- Now I'm not endorsing this view – I'm just telling you about it so you can think about it for yourselves.
- Because here we get into some very deep theological issues that are above my paygrade.
- Christians believe that Jesus was both fully God and fully human.
- But what does that mean about what he knew and didn't know at different times in his life?
- Was all of his divine knowledge available from the beginning, even as a baby?
- Or did he have to grow into it, as perhaps Luke suggests in 2:52 when he says Jesus "grew in wisdom and stature"?

- Or (third possibility) did he perhaps have *two* minds – a divine mind and a human mind?
- These were in fact questions that the Church debated in the early centuries.
- They were complicated debates, which I don't understand all the details of; and some of the answers were ultimately deemed heretical.
- So I'm not going to try to sort that one out here.
- Sometimes, thinking about a passage leads into some deep, hard questions that we don't know the answers to – and that's ok.
- There are other things here that are more important for us to consider and to learn from.
- For the disciples, maybe it was one of first intimations that Jesus is not just the Jewish messiah, but the savior of the whole world.
- For us, the woman in the story teaches us some things about prayer.
- Sometimes we need to be persistent – to be dogged – in praying, and not just for ourselves, but also, and perhaps even especially, for those who cannot help themselves, like her little daughter.
- Sometimes God answers prayers right away.
- Sometimes the answer is “no”, for reasons we don't understand.
- And sometimes the answer is “not yet”.
- And there are some very important things where we know it isn't going to happen yet, but it's important to keep praying anyway.
- We want a world with peace instead of war, love instead of hatred, justice instead of injustice.

- We pray for that every week at church, and maybe some of you pray for it every day.
- As Christians, we believe that Christ will eventually return and make a new heaven and a new Earth, where we will have these things, but it probably isn't going to happen in our lifetimes.
- And yet it is important to keep praying for them.
- And sometimes, with our prayers and work and God's help, some of the fruits of the Kingdom do appear in our lifetimes.
- What if the American Abolitionists had given up, and stopped praying and working for the end of slavery?
- What if St. Augustine's mother had not prayed daily for 20 years for her son to be saved?
- What if that woman Eric mentioned in his sermon last month had not gone to that healing service in her wheelchair, and come out walking?
- The old spiritual says "Every time I feel the Spirit moving in my heart I will pray."
- So pray, pray doggedly, pray without ceasing. Pray for yourself, pray for others, get others to pray *with* you.
- Maybe sometimes it seems hopeless...keep praying anyhow.
- Maybe sometimes you look foolish...keep praying anyhow.
- Maybe sometimes people even insult you or tell you to shut up...keep praying anyhow.
- Go to sleep praying.
- Wake up with a prayer on your lips.

- And every time you feel the Spirit moving in your heart, pray, pray, pray.

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