

Isaiah 56:1, 3-8

Psalm 67:2-3, 5, 6+8 *diff* (1-2, 4, 5+7) *R: May all peoples praise in peace.*

Romans 11:11-12, 16-20

Matthew 15:21-28

**Canines and Canaanites**  
**September 7, 2008 23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**

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What did Jesus do? Did he just ignore someone in need? Did he dismiss her with some nationalistic party-line, saying, “I didn’t come for the likes of you, but only to the house of Israel?” Did he just call her a dog? Sure, she wins their little repartee, with a witty quip: “Even the dogs get the crumbs from their owner’s table.” But still, here is a Jesus that jars our ears a little. Here, a Jesus who has to be persuaded to do what is right. Not only that, but he mixes all his metaphors: Sheep in a house, then add children to the mix, then a scrappy food-fight, with dogs no less, - and food, “left-overs”, fallen to the ground. It’s a right animal house, and I daresay it doesn’t seem to be lacking a few asses. Here, we have a Jesus depicted who, on the face of it, wasn’t exactly acting like a Christian.

But then again, Jesus wasn’t a Christian – or a Christian in today’s sense: He was, like the first followers – Jewish – or more properly put, a Judean [“Jewish” was not a word that came into existence until much later]. So, scroll back 2000 years, and what would have not quite sat right with them upon hearing this story is quite different from what rattles us. You see, what offends our ears, our pre-conceptions about Jesus, were not theirs. They might have been taken aback that Jesus “gave in”, - that he relented from his mission first to the Judeans, to the people of the house of Israel, - that he gave up on his own. And instead, Jesus journeyed towards Tyre and Sidon, erstwhile enemy territory, home to the Canaanites. Remember that bloody occupation? There were still awkward relations left-over. Hadn’t Jesus said, “Go nowhere among the Gentiles... Let us fix our own house first”? He had said that. And here he is, going there... And then, he actually gave in to a Canaanite, and to a woman. Which was worse?... A woman talking alone to a man without a husband in sight? Or a Canaanite? And, curiously, he did not call her the expected and accepted name for such a one: He did not call her a wild, ravenous, flesh-eating, frothing, wolf-like “dog”, - which there was a single word term for, often used to put down foreign peoples given their “unclean” ways: “Dogs.” Rather, he called her a little dog. He uses a diminutive, a softener, a sweetener: A domestic dog. A small breed. Useful for companionship, warns of intruders, perhaps even a farm help. One that loves its owners. And like the sheep Jesus speaks of, it is a dog that has a place in the house. Jesus went into “enemy” territory, consorted with the Gentiles, allowed a single woman to speak to him, and then calls her a pet-name, not the name she had coming...

But, of course, this story is not an historical blow by blow documentary of Jesus’ life: this is no movie reel of the real actions of Jesus. It is literature, it is story, and it is

Matthew's story, - and he has an agenda. He seeks to convey a religious truth for a certain time and place, and his medium is words, dramatic dialogue, back and forth banter. This conversation reads something like a volleyball game [you'll have to excuse me, as I watched the Olympics, I learned a little bit about the game]. You have three hits: your dig, your set, then your strike: The disciples get the dig, they bump the ball, which passes to Jesus – “Dismiss her, she's bothering us.” Jesus then sets: *You don't toss the food that is meant for the children, to the dogs.* Then the spike, *but even the dogs get the crumbs under the table.* In terms of the literary flow, Jesus sets the Canaanite woman up for the spike, - they are on the same team.

All the same, in this match-up, the Canaanite is still the dog, and Matthew insists strongly on the “house of Israel first”. But usually when things are strongly asserted as law or truth, it is because they have proven not to be true. For example, within the Hebrew Scriptures, there are several, strong injunctions in different places and at different times against intermarriage. Now, that does not tell us that it never happened – but rather that it must have been going on for there to be certain legislation against it. Sometimes it was so vehemently and strictly forbidden, we know it must have been quite widespread. And indeed we learn in other instances, that intermarriage became not only allowed, but blessed, and even desired.

And another example: If a thousand years from now or so, a few articles and documents out of the Vatican were found, they would come across numerous specificities about the role and place of women, and very strong language used against the ordination of women in the Roman Catholic Church. And they would be wrong to think that thus the ordination of women never existed, because it would rather indicate that it is indeed happening. The tighter the reigns and the tougher the words against this issue, may very well indicate that women's ordination is spreading wildly and wonderfully... Even this very day in Santa Barbara, this very hour, Jane and Rod, and we here along with them, celebrate newly ordained women into the throng. These are women and men who have decided to stand up to demand even the crumbs under the table. And for their great faith, they are blessed, they are brought to table, and their daughters will be brought to the table.

And similarly, back to the Gospel, Matthew's insistence that the Judean's come first, might very well mean that Judeans were being left behind. As the Gentile bands joined the followers of Christ in droves, the out-numbered Judeans were finding themselves “dismissed”. This is the interesting twist that we learn from Paul, who is trying his best to organize a broad and varied community of faith. Paul is insistent, just like the Canaanite woman was insistent, - on inclusion. But Paul insisted on the inclusion of the Judeans. Paul's mission, yes, was to the Gentiles, and he had struggled on their behalf to have them considered equal partners in faith with the Judeans. But in his letter to the church of Rome, a reversal had clearly already taken place: In the time of Jesus, it was the Gentiles who were suspect and thought unworthy by the Judeans, but by the time Paul is writing, and also Matthew, the seeds of anti-Semitism had been sown. The seam between the two that had become one that was tearing, and the Gentile followers of Christ were pulling at it. And Paul tries to counter this tide. And Matthew does too. In

both passages we have a reminder, strongly stated in Paul's letter, almost overstated in Matthew, that Judeans come first – they are the root, - from them comes Jesus. From them, come the first followers, from them, the church in Jerusalem, and from them, Paul their mentor. And to them, is owed their very faith. Don't dismiss them. They may be losing ground and status, but don't forget them, - they are your forebears.

Gentile –Judean relations were not easy or clear. How Judean did the Gentiles have to become? *Circumcision?* How much did the Judeans have to “give up” for the sake of the inclusion of the Gentiles. *Eating their unclean food?* Our own “groups” and relationships within the Church are not all that dissimilar. What does it mean to be “Catholic”? From the cradle? Ingrafted through faith or marriage? Commitment to social justice at home and abroad? Obedience to the hierarchy? Makers of grassroots movements so integral to the tradition and history? The fundamental question is still relevant. There are those of us who resist the dogma and hierarchy of the Vatican and live the change we want to see in the church. And this community, ecumenical, inclusive, progressive, and open, proclaims itself Roman Catholic. We will not waver from that. But there are those who would say we are not. The Judeans and the Gentiles did not hold it together. The Eastern and the Western Church could not hold it together. The Reformation and counter-Reformation could not hold the church together. Can we? It is our call, it is our family business. Those who were once One became “enemies”, and it's all been one very long family argument. If we can't get along with our own community– “our own house” – how then can we unite with the rest of the world who have less in common than we do? And so perhaps, with the Wisdom of Jesus, it really does need to start in our own “house” – our own family, even if sometimes it is much easier to get along with “others”, as the Gospel also points out. But splintering has been our history. Inclusivity, however, is our future.

Radical inclusivity is a hard call. We hear it preached on often. We see it in Jesus often. We embrace it as part of our mission. And it starts in community, with including each other. I have heard critics say that many in the West have slipped into an “easy universalism,” – a blind and liberal acceptance of all with little accountability. But anyone who has traveled, anyone who has gone on missions, anyone who has spoken with someone from a different culture, anyone who has lived in community, and anyone who has a sister or a brother with whom they just don't see eye to eye, - anyone who has tried to make “radical inclusion” work - will know that ‘though we are one human family, we are very different – and there is nothing easy about the call to universalism. We want to join with each other on our commonalties, which we do, which we seek, and that is good. But people are different, with different values, different customs, different ways of communicating that sometimes seem insurmountable, and “foreign.” There is nothing easy about radical inclusivity. In Matthew, we see it: Inclusion is met with resistance. In Paul's letter to the Romans, we see it: Hard to know how to include the faith community that bore you, but now rejects you. And hard to see the faith community you bore, reject you. And any parent, or community organizer, or global leader, will know that getting people to come together, to reconcile, to confront where necessary, and to unite for the sake of justice and ultimately peace is a high call, a tall order and no easy feat. But like Jesus, it *is* what we seek to do at home, and it *is* what we seek to do for the

world. That *is* what Jesus sought to do in our Gospel. That's what Paul was trying to do. That is the call of the Prophet Isaiah. And that is what we here are trying to do. We seek to stay rooted in the Gospel message of radical inclusivity of our own, and of radical inclusivity extended to all.

So we go about the family business, the business of God – the business of piecing God's house back together. It takes grace. It takes understanding. And it takes heart. But we know it is our call. We are called to those who have fallen through the cracks of power hungry institutions that live only for themselves, and we are called to remain rooted in the transcendent love that formed those same institutions. We are called together to help all people praise in peace, and we are called to be one in the One whose house, whose earth, whose Creation, we all live in. With the undeterred faith of the Canaanite woman, with the undeterred faith of the prophet Isaiah, and with the undeterred faith of Paul, all will be joined at table. May we make it so.