

## **Barre Congregational Church**

August 16, 2020: A Pastoral Message by Pastor Margaret Keyser

~ Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost~

***“Dogs, Crumbs and Faith”***

**(This sermon can be listened to on our Facebook Page and Website as part of our worship service)**

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**Scripture Reading: Matthew 15 v 21 - 28**

### **I. Introduction:**

Many or all of us have at some point, or at present, perhaps had a dog or dogs as pets and companions. Dogs are amazing animals. Back in South Africa I grew up with German Shepherds, or Alsatians, as we called them, and later in life had Dobermans, which were incredible watch dogs and awesome companions. I know many people love having their dogs inside the house, but I did not grow up with that practice. Our dogs had their food outside and slept in their kennels. Of course, our winters in South Africa are not that extreme, so they are able to survive outside during our winter months. Whatever the practices are with our dogs, and while I do not have a dog at present, dog lovers love their dogs, and grow accustomed to having them around. They are like family.

Well, in our passage we see Jesus in conversation with the Canaanite woman, talking about dogs and crumbs, not in a nice way, right? So, let's see why this was coming up in their conversation.

### **II. Jesus, Dogs and Crumbs**

Jesus again withdrew from the crowds to find a quiet space for a retreat. This time He left the area around Galilee and traveled to the region northwest of Galilee in Tyre and Sidon. This was not a work mission, but a time to just be away from the crowds and the developing opposition back in Jewish territory. As always, people spotted Him, or heard about Him in the vicinity, and would bring their sick to be healed and to hear the good news of the Gospel. This time round He is approached by a Canaanite woman, who was considered a Gentile by the Jews. She cried out to Him that her daughter who is home and demon-possessed needed help. She knew that this Jesus whom she heard about would be

the One to help her. She called Him Lord, Son of David, obviously understanding His background some.

The Canaanites were viewed as the enemies of the Israelites, and Jesus who was a Jew, and His disciples who came out of that tradition understood that, and so, here we find Jesus, the Jew responding to this Canaanite woman.

Jesus first ignores her call for help, and after the disciples complained to Him about her harassing them, He told her that He only came for the lost sheep of Israel, not for the Gentiles, like her. We see how the woman persists in her pursuit of His attention and His help. She then kneeled, asking Him to please help her. From here on things just get worse, because now Jesus starts to talk about dogs and crumbs! He tells this woman, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs"! He is literally comparing Gentiles with dogs here! How awful, isn't it? Dogs in the Jewish tradition were seen as unclean animals, which would have been an offensive metaphor to use against them; but the woman "brings Jesus into the kitchen" and tells Him, "but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table". She was very smart! R.T. France explains that this Canaanite and Gentile woman, who was viewed as an outcast by the Jewish people, understood the metaphor He used and was not going to lose an argument with Him. Dogs are not separate from the children and families. They are together. Similarly, she refused to be excluded from the grace of God by the Jewish tradition, and this Jesus, just because she was not a Jew. She knew enough about God's love and was confident in herself, and her need for her daughter's healing was too strong to be slighted like this! She knew He could do it, and she will not go away! She is saying to Jesus and His disciples, "I am here. I may not look like you, and may be from a different culture, and you may look at us as your enemy, but I believe that God, Yahweh can do wonders, and if You, Jesus are indeed the Son of David and had walked around healing people, then I will not leave. I will not let my cultural background be a stumbling block in the healing of my daughter. I will not let these disciples stand in my way either".

What a challenge to Jesus and His ministry, which up to this point was aimed at the Jewish people in His region mainly. This woman became a catalyst for the opening up of Jesus'

ministry to all people and all cultures! She first cried out to Him to have mercy on Her, then she kneeled before Him for help, and then she challenged Him. She made an intellectual argument with Him, which He could not ignore. Her persistence and fearlessness broke through to Him, which probably made Him chuckle, we don't know, and then He uttered these words, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." Then we read that her daughter, who was not even there, was healed from that hour onwards. What a drama we just witnessed!

We do not know why Matthew brings out this side of Jesus in this way, but what is true, is that Jesus was first a Jewish Rabbi, and grew into His role as Son of God. He was a Jewish man, with the knowledge of the Torah and knew the history of the Canaanites well, so He responded as a Jewish Rabbi in a Gentile context. This is a mystery, because He must have known that the message of the Kingdom of God has no boundaries.

The Good news is that He listened to this woman in distress. He was probably also humbled by her attitude. He saw in her a woman and a mother with great faith, and it touched Him deeply. He gave her what she came for. She, on the other hand, did not allow an insult of being compared to dogs to stop her from believing and knowing that He had the key to her daughter's healing and restoration. Her persistence made Him change His views towards people other than those He was familiar with. This encounter in the region of Tyre and Sidon would change and expand His ministry to all others.

### **III. Conclusion**

Perhaps next time when you look at your dogs, or other pets, may you have on the one hand, a little chuckle, and on the other hand think seriously about this message that is such a reminder that God's love bridges the divide, and is inclusive of everyone, irrespective of race and culture. Jesus Christ, whom we love and follow had to learn that lesson from a Canaanite woman and granted her request. We as Christ's followers, are not to think we can escape this message, especially today with its many challenges on race and culture. May God continue to teach and remind us as people of the church the values of love that transcends all differences, and may we be a blessing to all people. Amen.