**“Jesus Said What?!?”**

**Luke 7:24-30**

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“Dog” does not seem to be a bad word. In fact, when we use the word dog we think of that loyal part of the family that is always happy to see you. This family member lavishes love on you for no other reason than that they love you and just want to be with you. It doesn’t hurt that you are the source of their food either.

In fact “dog” is even a term of affection. You might have a whole posse of “dawgs,” often spelled d-a-w-g. They’re your acquaintances, your pals, your best friends. “What’s goin’ on dawg?”

Now it is true that dog can be used in a derogatory way. One might call someone they don’t think is good looking a dog. It doesn’t make much sense because I think dogs are some of the cutest things on earth. So if someone wants to call me a dog because of the way I look, I’m just going to have to take that as a compliment. But you know it is meant to be mean spirited. Even so, I don’t think calling someone a dog is the same cutting insult in our culture as it is in other cultures. The same word can have positive or negative meanings, depending on where you are from.

For instance, let’s look at the word fanny pack. You all know what a fanny pack is. It was very popular in the late 1980’s and 1990’s. It is a pouch on a belt that you wear around your waist. It was often worn with the pouch in the back, which is where it got its name from because the pouch would ride upon one’s buttocks. And a quaint synonym we use for buttocks is “fanny.”

When we first took our family to England to visit Karla’s brother, Kris, and we had fanny packs, Kris’s wife was appalled and a bit embarrassed that we called them fanny packs. Kris’ wife, at the time, was from South Africa and the word “fanny” in her culture was a very impolite word that one didn’t use in public. Same word, two different cultures, two different meanings, and polar opposites on the appropriateness scale.

“Dog” is the same way. A few years back my in-laws housed a young man from Libya for about six months. He was here studying at Michigan State and my in-laws got caught up with what was going on in Libya at the time. I don’t remember the details, but they had to find housing for several Libyan students, and my in-laws opened their house. When I was introduced to the young man staying with them I told him my name was Doug. I saw a great hesitation in his face, and he just sort of nodded. Later he confessed to my mother-in-law that he was hesitant to call me by name for fear of calling me “dog” which would have been an almost unforgivable insult in his culture.

I think the same is mostly true around the Middle East especially for the Hebrew people in Jesus’ time. So we read in the Gospel of Mark that Jesus was trying to ignore a woman asking for help and this is made even clearer in Matthew’s version. Jesus ends up comparing her and her kind to a dog. Even in American culturalized English, we understand it to be a slight. Actually how much more of an insult is it in that time and setting? It probably caused his disciples a little whiplash when they heard it. “Did he just call that woman a dog?” It surprises them. Or maybe it doesn’t. It does surprise us.

We are doing a sermon series this summer on “Jesus Said What?!?” I invited input from all of you on sayings of Jesus that causes us to scratch our heads. Sayings that don’t seem to fit our understanding of Jesus and who Jesus is. How do we grapple with them?

I’m actually glad there are these kinds of texts that have Jesus speaking words that catch us off guard. Too often I think we tend to sanitize Jesus. We make Jesus into who we think Jesus should be, and how we think Jesus should act, with the words we think Jesus should say. We have a tendency to domesticate Jesus to fit our perceptions and sensibilities. These hard sayings of Jesus keep us honest, on our toes, and remind us that our job is not to fit Jesus into our limited understanding, but to mold our understanding to fit Jesus.

And so we are surprised by Scripture sometimes, like when Jesus calls this woman a dog. The story goes, in both Mark and Matthew’s version that Jesus had been verbally sparring with some Pharisees and scribes. They were questioning him on why his disciples did not keep the purity laws and the tradition of the elders as any good Jew would do. They don’t even wash their hands before they eat. Jesus, in his theological deftness, out maneuvers their arguments and turns the table on their theological understanding. He then explains to the crowd that it is not what goes in that makes one unclean and unholy. It’s what comes out and what derives from their hearts.

And then, as he often does, after these intense exchanges with the authorities, Jesus removes himself from the crowd. He goes off on retreat with his disciples – away from the demands of his ministry. He heads to the region of Tyre and Sidon up in what is now modern day Lebanon. He went up north and a little west. You know, sort of like going to Marquette but not quite that far.

Anyway, he went up north and he tried to hide away. Mark says that he didn’t want anyone to know that he was around, but that didn’t work out so well. There was a woman whose daughter was not well. Mark says that she was possessed by an unclean spirit. Mark makes the point that she was a Greek, a Syrophoenician by birth. Matthew says that she was Canaanite. All are probably true. Tyre and Sidon were in Phoenicia. This area was often called Syro-phoenician because it belonged to the Roman province of Syria and it distinguished them from the Phoenicians that lived in the North Africa.

If you read Genesis, Sidon is actually the son of Canaan who in turn is a grandson of Noah. Genesis says that the Canaanites occupied a territory that extended from Sidon down to Gaza (10:19). So, she was probably Greek by language and religion, as many were in that area. She was Syrophoenician for living in that area, and she may very well have descended from the Canaanite lineage. So essentially all three could be true. All that to say that she was not Jewish and this sets up the story.

The woman’s daughter is sick, possessed by an unclean spirit. We don’t know how this woman knew Jesus or how she knew he was in the area. Mark infers, “Hey, this is Jesus. Word gets around.”

The exchange between Jesus and the woman takes us by surprise. Jesus is not his jovial, compassionate self, as we normally like to think of Jesus. He’s terse and he resorts to name-calling. Matthew magnifies the disdain that Jesus seems to have for this woman by saying that he wouldn’t even acknowledge her. Finally the disciples beg him, “Will you just tell her to go away? She’s making a nuisance of herself.” And so he finally says to the, Greek, Syrophoenician, Canaanite women, in so many words, “You are not my concern. I have come for the children of Israel. It would not be right to throw bread that belongs to the children to you dogs.”

There is no getting around what a slap in the face that was. And yet she persisted. “Yes, but even dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master’s table.” I like to think that there was a smirk that began to show on Jesus face at that moment. He basically tells her, “How can you argue with faith like that? Go, your child is healed.”

As we learned last week commentators don’t like to dwell on the hard sayings of Jesus. They and we tend to skip the hard stuff and move quickly to the feel good stuff. The woman had great faith. Jesus healed her daughter. All’s well that ends well. So, we skip over what a complete jerk Jesus was to this woman. (Did that make you sit up and take notice? It was even hard for me to say.) Because in the box that we have Jesus, it is impossible for him to be a jerk. He’s the Son of God. He’s of the same substance of God, so says our orthodox theology. And so we begin to make excuses for Jesus. Some theologians excuse him by saying that he was just testing the woman’s faith. It was nothing personal.

Sometimes we have to let Jesus stand on his own. When we stress his Godly nature so much, we forget that he was also human. He is not only savior; he is the archetype of who we are to be. So I can imagine that Jesus had some bad days. Why is he in Tyre and Sidon? Because he wanted to get away from everyone, and this woman cornered him. You know what that feels like. We don’t have to make excuses for Jesus.

Here is another way to view this passage. The tables got turned on Jesus. You remember what transpired that convinced Jesus to go on retreat for a while. He was in a theological repartee with the Pharisees, and Jesus was a master at taking their arguments and turning it back on them. What happens in this story when the woman answered, “Yes, but even dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master’s table,” is that she did to Jesus what normally Jesus does to others.

That smirk I envision spreading on Jesus face at her answer is as much for the joy of knowing he had been bested, as for her faith.

Did Jesus actually believe that this woman was a dog and not worth his time? I don’t know. Whether he did or did not, he still found the humility to learn from her. And in so doing we continue to see Jesus growing in wisdom and in grace. Perhaps a better subtitle for this sermon is “How to lose an argument with grace.” And our take away is that if Jesus is the archetype of who we are to be then we too need learn to lose an argument with humility and grace, and learn from those whom we might view as unworthy.

I pray that will be so in your life and in mine. Amen.