

A Dog's Place

James 2:1-10; 14-17; Gospel Mark 7:24-37

Sermon Notes from the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
16th Sunday after Pentecost, September 9, 2018
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I heard Desmond Tutu, the Anglican Bishop and Archbishop from South Africa, begin a sermon something like this.

I just can't stand name droppers. You know, people who act important because they know important people. It's a pretentious game. I can't stand name droppers. I was telling the Queen that very thing in Buckingham Palace just the other day . . .¹

James, we can imagine, doesn't think highly of name dropping, either. People aren't important because they are or are not famous. Giving 'famous people' special notice, for James, demonstrates a poor understanding of the Gospel.

We are to treat all people with generosity and respect. And if there is to be a priority, it is upon those who stand typically at the last of the line. James is reflecting Jesus' teaching. We don't care for people with rank first because our world ranks them higher. We care for all people, and we make it a point to be especially mindful of the people who don't have status, who don't wield power, who can't pay for the best seats in the house, whose voices typically aren't heard. If you need a picture of this person, think Bob Nutt. Bob died last week, and we will have a service for him soon; he did not have power or status that I knew about. Pay attention to people like Bob, James is saying. Make sure they have a comfortable spot at the table.

James suggests that we are called to notice the people who often aren't noticed, and that we make sure these—whom Jesus often calls “the least of these”—will find holy welcome at our assemblies and feasts. They will most certainly will find holy reception in heaven. And who are we to turn them away on earth?

On U.S. military bases, men and women in uniform operate according to a strictly defined hierarchical rank. Not so in military chapels on military bases. There is, I am told, no rank. All are welcomed in the chapel at the same level. They all are sinners equally in need of God's grace. They all are children of God. They all are brothers and sisters in Christ. All people are to be treated if not “equally” than with “equity.”

James says it clearly. Love your neighbor as yourself. Show no partiality. Sound familiar?

¹ I believe I heard this at the Festival of Homeletics conference, but am not certain.

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In our Gospel lection today we find a woman who approaches Jesus. She has heard about Jesus. She has a sick daughter, and she has heard that Jesus is a healer. Scripture says she approaches him and bows down. She bows down at his feet.

There's no telling what she has done for her sick child. There's no telling how many specialists she's taken her little girl to see. There's no telling how long she has wept, how long she has prayed, how long she has tenderly cared for her child. There's no telling how difficult it has been for this woman to be the mother of a sick girl who wasn't getting well.

Jesus had a reputation. Maybe he could heal her daughter. We understand why the mother came.

And we understand that she was an outsider. She is a Syrophoenician—possibly from Tyre or Sidon. Jews and Phoenicians are enemies, and the region of Tyre is a potentially “hostile territory for Jesus.”²

Note Jesus' response. “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.” It was, apparently, customary for Jews to call gentiles “dogs.” And name-calling is not unique to Jews; all people, all groups, all of us are guilty. As Eric suggested last week in his very good sermon, just hold up a mirror; look at yourself. Where do you see sin, waywardness, hate? It's there. Jesus is calling this woman—who has bowed down before him and who may literally be kneeling on all fours—a dog.

She briskly responds. “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.”

This is a powerful scene that makes me squirm. Sticks and stones will hurt my bones, but names will never harm me? No. That's not true. Did Jesus just call this woman a dog? She is an outsider. She is a non-Jew. She is a gentile. She is a Syrophoenecian. She is a woman. Yes. But a *dog*?

By responding this way, I think Jesus is underscoring the prejudice that exists in his day. He is making it clear to his disciples then and now that he knows where the boundaries are. He knows who is supposed to be at the back of the line. He knows how deeply prejudice slices into relationships. He knows how wide the ditch is between the insiders and the outsiders. He knows the so-called dogs from the so-called children.

Which is why he heals his daughter. This “dog” will get more than just crumbs from the table. Today, this persistent woman will sit at the head of the table—smiling, relieved, finally at peace.

² p 44 *Syrophoenician Woman*, New Interpreter's Dictionary, Westminster Press.

Followers of Jesus welcome all-comers. People who have trouble standing get the faster attention and the softer chairs. Children belong at the table, as do the insiders and outsiders, the rich and the poor, the old-timer and the new-comer. All are welcome. All are loved. All are fed. And together, because of this amazing grace, we can all say *Thanks be to God*.

So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

AMEN.

James 2:1-10; 14-17

¹My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? ²For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, ³and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," ⁴have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? ⁵Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? ⁶But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? ⁷Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

⁸You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." ⁹But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. ¹⁰For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.

¹⁴What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? ¹⁵If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, ¹⁶and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? ¹⁷So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

Gospel Mark 7:24-37

²⁴From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, ²⁵but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. ²⁶Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." ²⁸But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." ²⁹Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go — the demon has left your daughter." ³⁰So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.