

Sermon for September 5, 2015

To help us understand today's Gospel reading we need to look back at last week's reading. In that reading Jesus tells us that it's not the unclean things that we put into our bodies that make us unclean; it's the unclean things that are inside of all of us, such as sin, that makes us unclean. It is right after this that Jesus goes into Gentile territory, where not only the food, but the people were considered to be unclean, to try to get some rest and to recharge.

But that isn't going to happen because the news of the miraculous things that Jesus has been doing has even spread to this foreign land. An unnamed Syrophonecian mother has heard of Jesus' healings and she has come on behalf of her daughter who is at home possessed by a demon.

This desperate mother leaves all sense of convention behind as she seeks out Jesus. She is not to be out alone in public, she is not to talk to or to touch a man who is not a close relative and she is going to a Jewish man for healing for her daughter. And then we come to the part of the story that is hard for our ears to hear. Jesus calls her a dog. We try to soften it by thinking about puppies and our family pets, but dogs in Jesus' day were scavengers they weren't family pets. They were unclean. They are one of the reasons that there were few bodies left from crucifixions; they ate the dead and that made them unclean.

So why is Jesus so harsh to this woman? It's not just because she's a Gentile. He's already healed Gentile people such as the Gerasene demoniac and told him to share the good news about God's mercy to his friends. I think it goes back to last week's reading where we discussed that one of the purposes of the law was

to act as a mirror to show us our sinfulness. I think that here Jesus is showing the disciples and us the results of our behaviors. Jesus' original disciples may not have been shocked when Jesus called this woman a dog. It was a perfectly acceptable thing to do in Jesus' time. What shocks them is the fact that he healed her daughter.

We look at this passage and get upset when Jesus calls this woman a dog because Jesus is supposed to love her. I think Jesus looks at us and says that we're supposed to love her too. The disciples are shocked because Jesus heals this woman's daughter and we are shocked because Jesus calls her a dog. But aren't there people in our lives that when we see that bad things are happening to them that we think they are getting what they deserve? Be it us or the disciples—we don't think this woman and people like her are deserving of Jesus' mercy.

But you know what—this woman gets who Jesus is! The disciples needed everything explained to them. The Pharisees and the scribes didn't understand Jesus and his teachings. This woman got it. She knows that she isn't a member of the family, but she also knows that there is abundance to God's grace and that even a crumb of it is enough! She knows that there is no boundary to keep God's grace in and others out.

And that is such good news for us who are not part of the house of Israel. We are not the children who the bread was for first; we are the dogs who are getting the scraps. Through God's grace we have been grafted onto the original vine and receive the mercy that none of us deserve. Jesus hears our pleadings and comes into our broken lives giving us his grace. Then he sends us out to shock

others, not with our insults, but with the good news for all people: “The demon has left you daughter.”

The radical inclusiveness of God’s grace was hard for people to understand in Jesus’ time and it still trips us up today. We still think of some people as not deserving of God’s mercy. But we need to remember that none of us are deserving of that grace. Paul states it correctly in Romans when he says that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. But he also tells us that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us!

Christ went to that desperate mother and healed her daughter even though many thought her to be unworthy of such grace. Christ comes to us and gives to us the grace, mercy and love that we need—so much more than we deserve! God’s grace is just as surprising today as it was in Jesus’ time. God tears open the heavens to come into our world. God becomes human to experience our lives and give to us the salvation we need, but do not deserve. Thanks be to God for the undeserving love and mercy we are given through Jesus Christ!