

I gotta be honest, I don't know what to do with this Gospel reading. It's not my favorite. I've got some trauma from back in seminary on this one, thanks to a humorless professor's blank stare in the face of one of my greatest puns. But it runs deeper even than the embarrassment of a flopped joke. It's not my favorite because Jesus -- the perfect human, Son of God, bringer of Love and Peace and Forgiveness -- Jesus calls this woman a dog. It's not just that she's a foreigner and he calls her that. Not that that makes it ok either, but he's in her country! It'd be like going to Mexico and complaining that no one speaks English...only, worse.

The word "dog" carried all sorts of nasty implications. I mean, it's not even great now. But as bad as it is, it was worse. Dogs these days are cuties. They're family members, emotional support, even our senses. Dogs can smell low blood sugar and even detect Parkinson's! Dogs are great. But they're also gross. I don't need to spell it out from the pulpit, but there are reasons -- plural reasons -- why I don't let my dog lick my face. And for all those reasons, dogs were ritually unclean. In other words, hanging out with a dog meant you'd have to say some extra prayers and take a special bath just for petting one. By that system, I'd never get to do my job. A significant part of pastoral care entails getting my black shirts covered in hair. I even carry treats, 'cause ya never know when an emergency encounter'll happen.

But that's not what dogs were. They were gross and a nuisance and sometimes rabid and always worth keeping an eye on. Dogs weren't great. And calling a person a dog said a lot about them and about you. Calling a person a dog meant you didn't want them anywhere near you. For one thing, you'd have to go through all that trouble of getting ritually cleaned back up. But for another, it meant they were low, as low as whatever slakes a discerning dog's palate. That person then becomes a nuisance, distrusted, dangerous even, a filthy cur, and nothing more. And the person that says it? Well, how does your opinion change when you hear someone use a slur? It's not great, right? I've dropped relationships with businesses because an owner felt comfortable saying things like that. It's surprising, and it should be surprising, but in our world, it's not.

So, when Jesus ignores this woman in her own land and calls her a dog...it's not great. I want Jesus to be as pure as our theology says he is. I wish I could take the party line and say he was testing her or that her faith was just the witness he needed to turn toward the Gentiles or that she needed to humble herself or that she's a stand-in for all of humanity. All that's nice and tidy and completely unsatisfying. Because, like it or not, Jesus called a woman a dog after ignoring her didn't do the trick. Given the history Christianity has, that's not a good look. Christianity's done much to ignore and disparage the cries of women. Christianity's done much to enter foreign lands and insult those that live there. Christianity's done much to keep crumbs far from supposedly undeserving dogs in too many places to count.

Part of what troubles me's that I think there's two Christianities. There's the Christianity that does so much damage out in the world, and there's the Christianity that does so much good. I try with all my heart to be the good-doing kind of Christian. I try to teach that here. I try to live the Christianity that's infectious 'cause it's beautiful and kind and open. But then there's the other Christianity. The kind that says that Jesus' teachings are too liberal for today's political climate and don't work anymore 'cause they're weak. (That's a real critique that's out there, by the way.) The kind that says the poor deserve to be poor 'cause if they only lived right, they wouldn't be poor. (That's also real.) The kind that hears Jesus call a desperate woman a dog and says that's what we should do, too. (That's also real.)

Normally, when it comes to other denominations doing their thing, I take a live-and-let-live approach. They can go on and say whatever they're gonna say, and we'll be here to catch their wounded when they fall. But sometimes it's too much. It is sinful to hoard God's love and choose who we divvy it out to. It's sinful

'cause we start to put ourselves in God's position. But it's also just plain mean, and it pushes people away from the thing they so desperately need, Christians pushing people away from God. I'm not even sure the part of Christianity embracing that kind of hate, rejecting the Beatitudes for being too weak, delighting in Jesus putting a woman down, I'm not sure that can still be called Christianity. And I know, that's a hard claim to make. I'm sure the same could be said of me. Actually, I know the same's been said of me. I've read all about it in the comments sections. But the hate-filled, hate-fueled thing masquerading as Christianity is unrecognizable. I just can't see how we're the same. So, that's why Jesus and the d-word bother me. I wish he'd said something different. I wish he'd embraced her when she showed up. I wish he'd greeted her. I wish he'd fallen on his knees and washed her feet. But he didn't.

If there's anything to take from this story that gives me hope, it's that through the conversation, Jesus changed his tack. Some say he learned or he needed the challenge or she had to get the words just right. But the thing I hold onto is that Jesus was already preaching a gospel of love before he got there. The Pharisees and Sadducees said no good Hebrew should go anywhere near those unclean Canaanites, but Jesus didn't just happen on one, he went to their land. So, that's something, I guess. He carries his own context with him and responds as most Hebrew men of the time would've. But that gospel of love can't get tamped down by context and prejudice and nasty language. Jesus says his message is for the house of Israel, but the foreign woman calls Jesus her Lord! He may not be ready for it, but she is. And with that exchange, something (I don't know what it is, exactly) something changes. He goes from insulting her to recognizing something new. An expansion of what God's love could mean.

And that's where my sticking point is now. So much of the Christianity in this world has got it backwards. We see more and more Christians closing the circle, drawing hard lines determining how small God's love is. And it shrinks and festers and turns meaner and meaner and meaner and meaner and meaner. When actually the harder thing, the more faithful thing is expanding love beyond what we initially intended, beyond what we thought possible, beyond what we understood. None of that's bigger than God, and none of that's bigger than God's love. No matter who you are or what categories you fit into or don't, God's love is for you, and no person, no priest, no church gets to change that. God's love is for you.

I don't know, I can't un-dog this story. I can't clean up the exchange and sweep Jesus' words under the rug, but maybe there's still a glimmer of hope in the whole complicated mess. The glimmer that no matter what people try to make this gift of faith into, God's love wins out. Always. And if it hasn't won out yet, then it's not over. That's where I find hope. In spite of evil masquerading, in spite of the growing popularity of hatred, in spite of all the nasty names we call each other, there is always God's love. And no matter how much I think I've got a handle on it, it's always bigger than I think. None of us knows where that love ends. And if we think we do, we better figure out who we're rejecting by drawing a line. God's love doesn't draw a line. It draws us in. All of us mushed up with the last folks we thought deserved it or wanted it or even cared at all. There is no distinction. There's just love. Ever-growing, all-inclusive, deeply challenging love. And that's hard. That's harder than kicking folks out. It's harder than opening our doors to the supposedly unclean. When religion affirms our sensibilities, it's easy and vacuous and fruitless.

There's a challenge here, but it's not for an ancient woman at an ancient well. It's for us. The challenge to love beyond what's easy, to love in fullness, to bear fruit that bears more fruit and more fruit still. The challenge to love like God does, to love every bit of humanity, yes, every bit. We start here, practice here. We gather with folks we see during the week and folks we avoid in the grocery store. We leave doors unlocked for whoever needs it, desirable and deplorable alike. We make ya coffee if you sleep on our couches, we get ya a jacket if you're cold, we pray for your doctors when you're sick, and we bring ya casseroles even if you don't like casseroles. I'll even pet your dog. There's a lot we do to show our love, but the real change is the invisible

movement of our hearts. Right at the core of this place, love grows, and love gives life with every pulsing beat. In spite of evil masquerading, in spite of growing hatred, in spite of all the nasty things we do, God's love's always bigger. And God's love's always getting bigger. No matter who you are or what categories you fit into or don't, God's love is for you. And no person, no priest, no church can ever change that. God's love is for you.