

We have domesticated dogs into beloved members of our families. We have therapy dogs, service dogs, rescue dogs, dogs with their own Instagram accounts. We buy them special food and beds and toys. But dogs haven't always had the best reputation. While they were likely one of the first animals to be domesticated, that doesn't mean that they are without reputation.

Especially in the Bible, dogs have had a fairly horrible reputation. They were frequently seen in packs in the city streets - scavengers, associated with garbage, blood, and death – licking wounds and returning to their vomit.

To be called a dog meant – a bit like it does today – that the person or people were on the margins of human society – groveling, begging, associated with garbage, blood and death – certainly associating with such a person would make you unclean.

And that is where we begin our story found in scripture today.

The Canaanite Woman's Faith Matthew 15:21-28

²¹ From there, Jesus went to the regions of Tyre and Sidon.

²² A Canaanite woman from those territories came out and shouted, "Show me mercy, Son of David. My daughter is suffering terribly from demon possession."

²³ But he didn't respond to her at all. His disciples came and urged him, "Send her away; she keeps shouting out after us."

²⁴ Jesus replied, "I've been sent only to the lost sheep, the people of Israel."

²⁵ But she knelt before him and said, "Lord, help me."

²⁶ He replied, "It is not good to take the children's bread and toss it to dogs."

²⁷ She said, "Yes, Lord. But even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall off their masters' table."

²⁸ Jesus answered, "Woman, you have great faith. It will be just as you wish." And right then her daughter was healed.

Jesus' interaction with the Canaanite comes just after Jesus teaches the crowd a new idea about purity. Here Jesus helps the crowd to understand what it is that makes us impure.

He later explained this to Peter in 17-20 of Matthew 15 "Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?" ¹⁸ But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. ¹⁹ For out of the heart

come evil intentions, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.

²⁰ These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.”

Jesus just said that uncleanness does not come from external things—from food, contact, or ritual boundaries—but from the human heart. You see, the problem is not the food, just like the problem isn't the dogs under the table. The problem is deciding that someone else is the dog and, thus, cannot join us at the table. Matthew immediately gives us a concrete example of the meaning of his words though the encounter between Jesus and a woman who, according to every external boundary of the culture, ought to have been considered unclean.

This account in Matthew isn't the first time Scripture has used the language of the dog in an unexpected way. There is another person in Scripture whose name literally means ‘dog’—and he turns out to be one of Israel's great examples of faith. That man? Caleb.

Caleb's story is one of faith and faithfulness. When everyone else sees giants, Caleb sees God's faithfulness. When everyone else sees impossibility, Caleb sees possibility. Caleb believed God's promise when everyone else was terrified.

I think Caleb is so very fascinating for several reasons, more than what I already stated. Caleb's ancestry is a little vague. It's different enough to be remarked upon in scripture when talking about him. He is called, “Caleb, the son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite. Kenizzites were Edomites and they were descendent from Esau. While still a child of Abraham and Isaac, he was an outsider to the children of Jacob, called Israel.

Caleb is a reminder that God's promise has always had a way of reaching beyond the boundaries we think are secure.

And forty-five years after he first spied in Canaan, as land was divided between the tribes, Caleb, still faithful, requested the hill country and was given it because “he remained loyal to God all these years.” Joshua 13: 13-14.

Caleb – a spy, leader, encourager, faithful follower of God – a guy with a complicated ancestry whose name is, literally the Hebrew word for “dog” became one of Israel's greatest examples of faithfulness.

The Canaanite woman lived in precisely the kind of place that respectable religious people might want to avoid. And, as you know, women, especially Gentile women were considered unclean by the cultural and religious norms of the Jewish people. That she had a daughter tormented by a demon made her even more unclean – if that was possible. And yet, she came to Jesus. “Have mercy on me, Lord, son of David.” She cried out. She acknowledged his lineage and access to the Covenant while begging him to even just look at her.

At first Jesus didn't answer her. The disciples responded like we respond when we're uncomfortable with someone else's needs. “Send her away,” “Oh I wish she would just go away” How can we make our problem disappear?

But she didn't go away. When Jesus finally responded he told her, “I was only sent to the lost sheep of Israel” (meaning that SHE wasn't one of the lost sheep) and he continued, “It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.”

He was literally calling her – and people like her – a dog. But something gets lost in translation that makes this interaction so lovely. Jesus and the woman were having a “punny” interaction. The word Jesus used for “dogs” is more a diminutive form of the word. It's like saying, “puppy” today and it refers to a sweet house pet – and not the fierce feral dogs roaming the cities scavenging trash. The distinction matters, but it doesn't really erase the tension.

Even with the diminutive, the woman was still operating on the boundary. And instead of allowing that boundary to exclude her, she turned Jesus' own image back toward him. She didn't just walk away or become defensive. She didn't give up. She saw something in Jesus' words that give her hope.

She responded in kind, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.” She used Jesus' diminutive “puppy” AND then proceeds to use the same diminutive word form for crumb. So, her actual response was something like “Even the little puppies eat the little crumblets that fall from the master's table.”

The outcast woman's persistence was precisely what made her faith so striking. She didn't reject the table or demand the children's place – she didn't even ask for a full meal. She said, “even the tiny crumbs from off your table are enough for me.” She claimed a

place within the abundance of God's table. She sank her teeth into the wordplay with Jesus and became one of the clearest examples of faith in the Gospels.

Jesus responded: "Woman, great is your faith!" and her daughter was healed.

Here is an interesting side note and something to ponder. The only other person in the Gospels to whom Jesus says, 'Great is your faith,' is another outsider—a Roman centurion who also came to Jesus seeking healing for someone else.

The irony that we see today is that, throughout Scripture, dogs appear at the margins and yet Caleb was called the dog, and the Canaanite woman was compared to the dogs. Both become examples of extraordinary faith. In the end, Caleb received an inheritance and the Canaanite woman received mercy. Both stood somewhere near the boundary of who was in and who was out. Both trusted God's promise and both discovered that God's grace is bigger than the boundary.

There is enough.

Enough for Caleb.

Enough for the Canaanite woman.

Enough for the disciples.

Enough for the people we understand.

Enough for the people we don't understand.

Enough for those we think belong.

Enough for those we have pushed to the margins.

Enough for us.

And so perhaps the final question isn't:

"Who gets the crumbs?" Perhaps the best question is really "Why are we still arguing over the table when Jesus is inviting everyone to the feast?"