

Sermon – Mark 7:24-37; Isaiah 25:4-7a
David R. Lyle
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“Who Let the Dogs In?”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. My old preaching professor, David Lose, once wrote that “the more challenging or difficult a passage, the more likely it is to lead to a great sermon.” Well, I make no promises, but if he’s right, you’re about to hear a home run, because today’s gospel reading is about as tough as they come. Why? Because we’re presented with a view of Jesus that is difficult to see, that challenges our preconceptions. Having just called out the hypocrisy of the Jewish religious leaders, so caught up on what can make you unclean from without that they forget to look within, he journeys now into Gentile territory. To the lands where uncleanliness was the norm. He meets a woman who, with the audacity born of a mother’s desperation, dares to approach him. She bows and begs before Jesus, imploring him to cast out the demon in possession of her daughter. And what does Jesus say? “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Whatever else might be going on here, it’s his final word that trips us up. Did he just call this woman’s daughter a dog? It’s tempting to try to put a shine on his words; perhaps he’s joking, or perhaps in the ancient Near East calling someone a dog was cute or endearing. Perhaps you’ve read or been told such things before, but these are solutions that hold as much water as a sieve. Calling someone a dog was an insult and, in this particular moment, one that seems driven by racial and religious difference. Why, Jesus is asking, would I

- give a dog like you anything when my people, the chosen children of God, are hungry and in need?
2. Jesus, this sinless but very human Jesus, is caught here by the same forces that confront us. On the borders, where people of difference interact with one another, they do so with threats and insults. When confronted with humans that are different, we tend to dehumanize, which is exactly what Jesus' words seek to do. You are not person; you're a dog. It is uncomfortable to hear these words, picture this interaction. Our Jesus, perfect Jesus, would never do such a thing. And yet here we are? What are we to do with such a Jesus?
 3. I've had a lot of conversations lately in which people have expressed a feeling of being closed in. The hope of the summer, when we talked about "coming out of COVID," has given way to a feeling of "here we go again." ICUs are filling up as travel restrictions are handed down. As climate change continues to rear its ugly head, we watch as the west burns and the east is inundated with water. And the withdrawal from Afghanistan has heightened a humanitarian crisis in which humans become refugees; at least, those lucky enough to get out. We are in closed-in times. These difficulties do not tend to bring out the best in people. Blame is cast and names are called, and people become ever more deeply entrenched in their own positions, however misguided or just plain wrong. We, whoever we are, are the good, the righteous, the holy. Those people? Nothing more than dogs.
 4. If we let go of our need to gloss over or apologize for Jesus' words, we see just how good the good news of our God is. We do not see a Jesus who is entirely immune from this world's problems, but we do see an amazing thing. In Jesus, we see the possibility of change. Debie Thomas writes, "The 'Good News' is not that we serve a shiny, inaccessible deity who floats five feet above the ground. It is that Jesus shows us – in real time, in the flesh – what it

- means to *grow* as a child of God. He embodies what it looks like to stretch into a deeper, truer, and fuller comprehension of God's love." And why does he do this? He is motivated by the faith of this foreigner, this woman, this person who had no standing before Jesus so bows before him instead: "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Her words, her comprehension of just how abundant the Kingdom God is, seem to remind Jesus of his mission, the fulfillment of the promise made long before to Abraham and Sarah – that from them would come blessing not only for their many descendants, but for people of every nation.
5. Moving on to the region of the Decapolis, Jesus is encountered by another person in need, another Gentile, this man who was deaf and had trouble speaking. Jesus no longer seeks to hold a foreigner at a distance. The scene is intimate, tactile. Jesus sticks his fingers in the man's ears, spit on the ground, touches the man's tongue. And then he looks up to heaven and sighs. If Mark had drawn a thought bubble in the margins of his manuscript, I can imagine Jesus thinking as he sighs, "I hear you, Father. Thanks for the reminder of the mission. Let's do this." Then, in Aramaic: *Ephphatha*. Be opened. Not only do the ears and mouth of this man open up, but we are given a sign of wide-open eschatological hope. Isaiah's prophecy springs to life, with sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf and those who could not speak now bursting into songs of praise. *This* is what the future will look like, and *this* is what Jesus enacts in the present for these two Gentiles.
 6. Jesus came first for the people of the promise, yes, but not only for them. The woman in today's passage caught that vision and knew that at the feast of the Lord even the crumbs are more than enough, more than we could ever anticipate or need. Jesus would keep journeying, from Tyre and the Decapolis all the way to Jerusalem, where he would die on the cross, both as victim of and atonement for this world's sinful refusal to live out God's expansive vision. His body would be laid to rest in a tomb, bereft of hearing, sight, or

speech. Dead. Completely closed in. But God, if God speaks Aramaic, would say in that moment exactly what Jesus said to the man who was deaf: *Ephphatha*. Be opened! And out of dry, dusty death would suddenly flow streams of living water quenching the thirst of the ground and giving life to all creation. Out of death, resurrection. Today, we come to Jesus' table. We find placed in our hands a little bread; we drink a little wine from a little cup. Crumbs, really, but crumbs that hold the fullness of the body and blood of Christ, this Jesus who gave his life to forgive our sins and fulfill God's promises for people of every nation. Even you and me. We may be little more than stray dogs. But there are seats at the table for us next to the lost sheep, all gathered at the Lamb's high feast, beggars no more. These crumbs of grace are enough.

7. And if we live in the hope of the day when dogs and sheep eat together, when lions and lambs lie down together, what does that mean for our living now? Perhaps simply this. That if Jesus could admit a mistake, change his mind, chart a new direction, so, by his grace, can we. We can loosen the grip on our prejudices and undig our heels. We can step into the sunlight of a world ever opened up by God's transformative grace. For we whose ears were once stoppered in sin have had that old wax removed. We whose tongues were tied with slander and insult have learned how much better it is to sing God's praise. In the power of the risen Christ, we are made new. We who were dead are alive. *Ephphatha*, my friends. Be opened. Live in the open, with open hands and open hearts, with a faith that lives to work for the sake of others, wherever they come from, whatever they look like, whoever they are, for they are children of the blessing, too. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.