

## *No Bones About It*

The first sermon in the series:

*The God We See*

Mark 7.24-30 (The Message)

September 6, 2009

“But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus,  
‘And who is my neighbor?’”

- Luke 10.29

He said, “Feed my sheep.” There were no conditions: least of all, Feed my sheep if they deserve it... if you feel like it... if the economy’s OK...

No conditions... just, “Feed my sheep.”

- from *Feeding Sheep* by Ann Weems

### *The Reading*

<sup>24-26</sup>From there Jesus set out for the vicinity of Tyre. He entered a house there where he didn't think he would be found, but he couldn't escape notice. He was barely inside when a woman who had a disturbed daughter heard where he was. She came and knelt at his feet, begging for help. The woman was Greek, Syro-Phoenician by birth. She asked him to cure her daughter. <sup>27</sup>He said, "Stand in line and take your turn. The children get fed first. If there's any left over, the dogs get it." <sup>28</sup>She said, "Of course, Master. But don't dogs under the table get scraps dropped by the children?" <sup>29-30</sup>Jesus was impressed. "You're right! On your way! Your daughter is no longer disturbed. The demonic affliction is gone." She went home and found her daughter relaxed on the bed, the torment gone for good.

Today's sermon is the first in a series called *The God We See*. For the next few weeks we will search out glimpses of God in one, specific place; the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. You might say, “Well, duh! Of course we look for God in Jesus.” But I beg to differ. We often think about Jesus – this or that act of compassion; this or that teaching - but we fail to ask ourselves what that act or teaching tells us about God. We should ask this question, because the clearest and definitive word about God is visible only in the life of Jesus.

We most often turn to the Old Testament when we're thinking about God ...and rightly so because there are some wonderful, wonderful passages, some spectacular passages that talk about God. You can go back to the creation narratives in Genesis 1 and 2 and think about the

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*James R. "Bo" Crowe*  
*Overland Park Christian Church*

God of creation ...the awesome God of creation. There are wonderful Psalms like the one read in our midst this morning that promise good things from God, the promise that God loves and cares for the needy, feeds the hungry, frees the prisoners ...wonderful words about God. There are wonderful expressions in the prophets; take Isaiah for example. Read of his experience in chapter 6 when he experienced a vision of the Lord high and lifted up in the temple. Again, take Moses who saw God in a bush that burned but was not consumed. These are spectacular, remarkable passages to which we turn for our ideas of God. But I suggest that in the next few weeks we look at another source; the life of Jesus. It may not always be as spectacular, it may not always be as sensational, but we find there a definitive revealing of the God of grace and love. Let's pray for a moment, shall we.

Gracious One, help us to seek your faith in the life, the experience, the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. We pray that our ideas about you will come from this, the definitive source, and if we're lucky, if we're able to transcend thoughts about you, to experience your transforming presence in our lives. Teach us to put more faith in you than even in the noblest, the grandest ideas about you that we may have. Bless us in this time; open the eyes and the ears of our hearts to know you, to feel you, to follow you more clearly. In the name of the Christ. Amen.

It's going to sound kind'a strange for an old southern boy to say, but the Christian faith comes with its very own bias built right in to it. We're downright prejudiced as Christians. It's OK though, I can say that, because I'm not talking about racial bias and the prejudice that I grew up with in the Deep South. I'm talking about a bias toward Jesus when we want to understand God. When we want to know something of the deepest reality of God, and especially of how God relates to us; we look to Jesus. When we read the bible, for example, we are biased because we read the bible in the light of Jesus of Nazareth. This one life is our definitive source and authority; and any reading you or I might propose has to be evaluated in the light of Jesus; His life, His experience, His teachings. We're just downright biased as we read the bible because we insist that the best reading we could ever find is one that conforms to the life and teaching of Jesus.

You might say, Bo that's all well and good, but this is a tough nut to crack today. This story sounds very uncharacteristic of Jesus, the Jesus who is normally compassionate and sensitive to every individual he meets is downright insulting to this woman, this Syro—

Phoenician woman. Oh, perhaps that explains it. After all, she is not a Jew. After all, she does not hail from Judea or Galilee. She is a foreigner and a pagan.

However that may be, Jesus certainly appears to insult this woman. Did you notice that? He calls her a dog, which is a derogatory expression the Jews used to refer to Gentiles, who shared neither their ethnicity nor their faith. They often called them dogs, and in this passage Jesus himself seems to slip into that mindset. The woman comes to Jesus and pleads with him to heal her daughter. Jesus reminds her that the children - the children of Israel that is – eat first, and only the leftovers fall through the cracks to tease the dogs.

I grew up with a bunch of folks who might love this passage. Take, for example, my college landlord. He was the chairman of the deacons in his church, but made it a point to let me know when I moved in that there would be no blacks in his house at any time. “I might have to work with them,” he said, “but I don’t have to let them in my house!” This man would probably be very happy with this passage. Jesus is telling it like it is he might say. He is putting people in their proper place; children at the table, and dogs at their feet.

People like my college landlord might like the way this passage reads, at least on the surface of it. But things are often not as they appear, and anyone who thinks Jesus is condescending to and disrespecting this woman is just plain wrong. It’s the way Jesus talks to the woman that tells the tale; it’s his intention in using this provocative language that casts it in the proper light. It would be very easy for us to understand his attitude if we could see his eyes as he’s talking with this woman; you know what they say, a picture is worth a thousand words. It would be very easy for us if we could hear the tone of his voice; for if so we would hear a voice charged with satire – saying the opposite of what he means – uttered not so much to the woman, but to his opponents who would feel right at home with my college landlord. In this passage Jesus adopts a teaching technique commonly employed by Rabbis in his day; speaking with biting satire in order to critique a position with which he fervently disagrees.

Do you remember last week’s gospel reading in which Jesus critiques the attitude of the Pharisees? They lived a religion of purity. They lived what I called religion *from the outside in* that protected them from the evils of the world. Just as Jesus criticized their scrupulous avoidance of anything that would pollute their lives – anything from shrimp to Samaritans – so

here he criticizes their attitude toward non-Jews, foreigners, and pagan worshippers. In this passage Jesus is not really talking to this woman, he's talking for the benefit of the Pharisees; undermining their position altogether. As I read the passage, Jesus speaks with a wink of his eye, letting her know that while there are those who would treat her like a dog, he was not one of them. Jesus is not - as my son would say - dissing this woman. He is not despising her, rejecting her, or pushing her away. He speaks satirically to "diss" the position of anyone who would do just that, anyone who would push the woman away, anyone who would call her a dog and mean it. Jesus was a man of compassion, a man who looked with respect and appreciation at every individual who crossed his path, a man who reached out to all and sundry with grace and goodwill.

Please note that Jesus does heal the woman's daughter. Some would say that in doing so, Jesus is simply creating a level playing field. That is to say, he treats all people the same; there is no special treatment for the Children of God; Jesus treats everyone the same, including the Syro-Phoenician woman. Some would say that Jesus is like the statue of Lady Justice, wearing a blindfold to insure impartiality. Create a level playing field, treat everyone the same, and let them compete on equal footing for God's bounty; let them stand on their own two feet to sink or swim. In truth, Jesus is not like Lady Justice. In truth, God is not even handed and impartial. God has no interest in simply leveling the playing field. God has no interest in treating everyone the same. God knows that individual needs are not equal, and God treats each individual on the basis of her or his needs.

Jesus in this passage is not impartial at all; he makes no bones about reaching out to her in compassion and sending her on her way with the assurance that her daughter is well. Make no bones about it, Jesus is partial toward her as he is partial toward all of the individuals he meets: people on the margins of acceptability, the poor or diseased, even outcasts. He is partial to them, and by his actions pleads with us to recognize and meet the needs of such people in our day. This is nothing new. The classical prophets had pled the case for the poor and needy for centuries. "...what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Micah said (6.8).

Jesus is not impartial; he is partial toward this woman, and he's just as partial toward you; because the same love, the same compassion, the same source of healing and wholeness that he extended to this Syro-Phoenician woman, he extends to you. In addition, Jesus invites us to model this kind of compassionate bias in our lives. We can't be Jesus. We can't heal at a distance. We can't feel someone touch the hem of our garment and release healing power; but we can be a part of God's healing efforts as we recognize and respect each other, as we support each other, as we hold hands in prayer, as we sit with loved ones during surgery, and as we open our doors and welcome new folks into our faith community without requiring that they look and act and talk exactly the way we do. There is a lot we can learn about God from this passage, and there's a lot that we can do in our lives to more closely model the God we see in this simple story. Amen.