



Dogged Faith

Mark 7:24-30

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One thing that I have always wanted and never had is a dog of my own. I begged for a dog when I was a kid, but my parents said our lot was too small and it wouldn't be fair to tie a dog up all day. When I was 16 we moved to a more expansive lot, but then the college years were looming and there was no point in getting a dog then. The day I left for college a black dog came up the driveway and my Mom said, "That looks like Smokey" (a dog she had as a child). Wouldn't you know that stray dog became ours the very day I moved away?

When I came home from college on breaks, I would wake up in the morning to the smell of eggs and bacon. I thought Mom had really got with the program since breakfast had always been "every man for himself." But when I went downstairs I found my Mom making a breakfast sandwich for the dog. Otherwise it was still "every man for himself" and I was left to shuffle through whatever cereal box I could find. That dog had a life, and his crazy character fit in well with the Schnell household, but he wasn't my dog.

I married into a dog, who didn't much care for me at first. After a regular regimen of nightly walks that dog warmed up to me, but it was my wife's dog and not really mine. Sometimes I see a little pup while I am out walking and say to the owner, "I wish I had a dog." A dog of my own. A dog I picked and named. A dog whose care and feeding I could turn over to my wife. Just imagine how happy that little tail-wagger would be seeing me come home from church each day! Not so a fickle feline. Cats don't wag their tails. Cats could care less when you come through the door, the little ingrates.

Dogs have such good qualities. Dogs will wait, and wait and wait by the door for the kid to come home from school or the old man to come home from work. Dogs are persistent. The title of our message is: "Dogged Faith." We are talking about a persistent faith—one that doesn't give up when the wait gets long or the going gets tough. The word, "Dogged" means persistence, tenacity and determination. Watch a beagle chase a rabbit or a coon hound track a raccoon and you'll get the point. The image was even applied to God by the poet Francis Thompson in his poem, "The Hound of Heaven."

Well, Jesus applies the image to someone in our text for today. After a busy couple of days feeding the five thousand, walking on water and contending with his detractors in the region of Galilee, we read: *Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence a secret* (Verse 24). Jesus had been challenged to find time alone with his disciples, such was the press of the crowds around him, so he left the country altogether and ventured 30 miles to a foreign land—specifically the city of Tyre in Phoenicia (then a part of Syria and now where modern day Lebanon is located).

However, Jesus' fame had gone international. Another time when Jesus had been on the move we read: *Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the lake, and a large crowd from Galilee followed. When they heard all he was doing, many people came to him from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, and the regions across the Jordan and around Tyre and Sidon* (3:7-8). So Jesus' reputation had preceded him even to the foreign town of Tyre where he now hoped for some blessed anonymity. But it wasn't meant to be.

Our text continues: *In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an evil spirit came and fell at his feet. The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter* (Verses 25-26). A couple of points to consider: 1) The woman was Greek and lucky for her that Jesus was tri-lingual, speaking Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek, so he could converse with her. 2) Being described as a Greek meant she was decidedly not a Hebrew like Jesus and the disciples. 3) In Matthew's account of this incident he refers to the mother as *a Canaanite woman* (Matthew 15:22). Canaanites and Jews did not get along any better then than Arabs and Jews get along now. 4) This is the only time Jesus leaves Palestine proper.

The importance of these points will be considered in a moment. For now it should be noted that this woman is a mother with at least one child—a *little daughter* whom she loves. Her daughter's well-being is being compromised by what was then called *an evil spirit*, but what might be called today a mental illness or self-destructive compulsion of one sort or another. This woman has heard of Jesus' ability to deliver people from their evil spirits and she has come to fall at his feet and beg him *to drive the demon out of her daughter*.

A kneeling woman is begging Jesus to save her little daughter. And how does he respond? *"First let the children eat all they want," he told her, "for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs"* (Verse 27). Did Jesus just call this woman a dog? Technically, he used the Greek word for "puppy." His point is this: Jesus has come to this foreign place to get away from the incessant demands upon him so he can instruct his disciples. This is their time—quality time with Jesus. They are the children he intends to spiritually feed.

Would it be right to split their time with non-Jews? Would it be right to feed food for children to the begging puppies under the table? Of course not! Go away begging puppy. This is a cold side of Jesus we don't usually see depicted in the artistic

renditions of him. But the woman takes no offense. She knows she is a foreign outsider as far as Jesus people are concerned. But her daughter is still at risk, and Jesus is still the one who can save her, and this woman is not one to give up easily.

“Yes, Lord,” she replied, “but even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs” (Verse 28). All this woman needs is a crumb from Jesus. Just say the word and my daughter will be saved. That is what this woman believes. That is the kind of faith she has in the Lord. In fact, this is the only place in Mark’s entire gospel where Jesus is addressed as “Lord.” It is amazing where you find faith in the gospel story of Jesus, and equally amazing where you do not find it. You do not find it among the religious leaders of Jesus’ people, but you do find it among the infidel, mongrel “Canaanite dogs.”

Then he told her, “For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter.” She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone (Verse 30). I guess Jesus was not so cold-hearted after all. Indeed, I think Jesus went beyond the borders of Palestine for this reason—to demonstrate for his Jewish disciples how faith could be found even among the gentiles. I kind of like Matthew’s version of Jesus’ response. *“Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.” And her daughter was healed from that very hour* (Matthew 15:25).

A great faith is a persistent faith—a dogged faith if you will—a faith that does not falter and fail in the face of obstacles. In our Old Testament lesson Moses selected 12 spies, one from each of the 12 tribes of Israel, to scope out the Promised Land in advance of an invasion. All 12 came back with a great report of the land’s fertility and other attributes, but 10 spies counseled against an invasion because the inhabitants were powerful and well-entrenched and conquering them was out of the question.

Only 2 spies, Caleb and Joshua, put their trust in the Lord to bring them the victory as he had promised. Caleb in particular said: *“We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it”* (Numbers 13:30). But being outvoted, the faith-challenged Israelites wandered in the wilderness until that entire generation passed away—all except Joshua and Caleb. After Moses died, Joshua took the reins of leadership and led a new generation of God’s people into the Promised Land to take possession of it. The only other person from the previous faithless generation to join him was Caleb.

Interestingly, Caleb is the Hebrew word for “dog.” Caleb had a dogged faith in the Almighty that did not fail in the face of difficulties, and it paid off for him in the end just like it paid off in the end for that Syro-Phoenician woman with the dogged faith in the Lord. And so it will pay off for you and me if we have a dogged faith that refuses to take “no” for an answer, that trusts in the Lord despite the odds and that believes God will save us and redeem all our present difficulties even if we don’t clearly see how right now.

Our faith will be tested, to be sure, for an untested faith is no faith at all. Sometimes the Lord will appear to us cold and caring little for the distress we are suffering. Sometimes

we will feel as if he is begrudging us even a crumb of hope. Sometimes we will feel that a good life is reserved for someone else—someone more privileged or deserving than we are—but apparently not for us. If we ever feel that way, our faith is being tested. Do we have a fair weather faith that falters and fails when the thunderstorms gather, or do we have a dogged faith that trusts in God's promises come-what-may?

Life's trials will certainly test our faith. But they serve another purpose, which is to bind us closer to the Almighty. Many things draw us away from God such as fear, temptations and pride. But trials have the redeeming power to draw us closer to God by cultivating personal humility and a proper sense of need for a power greater than ourselves. So the Lord is not cold and distant by allowing some difficult circumstances to linger for a season. He knows the power of trials to bind us ever closer to him.

While searching the internet under the heading of "Military Dogs" I came across story after story depicting the close bond between combat handlers and their dogs in all branches of the service. We know how a combat environment has the power to bind together soldiers of all races, classes and cultures into a band of brothers who have had each other's backs time and time again. The same goes for combat handlers and their dogs—dogs who sniff out buried improvised explosive devices before their handlers come into harm's way, and who sometimes take bullets while covering their handlers in a firefight, like one dog who miraculously survived after being shot 4 times.

Some dogs are retired from service before their handlers, while other handlers complete their rotations before their dogs' service is completed. But it is little wonder that so many handlers follow the whereabouts of their dogs in the hope of being reunited with them. One soldier, at his own expense, recently traveled to Afghanistan to adopt his retired dog and bring him home to live out the remainder of life in a loving and caring environment. The videos of their reunions will bring tears to the eyes.

Life's trying times must be seen in the larger redeeming context of what they achieve for us. May they serve to test our faith and prove it true as a dogged faith; and may they draw us ever closer to the saving, redeeming and promised power of "The Hound of Heaven."