

## Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

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James 2:1-10; 14-17

Mark 7:24-37

### A DOGGED FAITH

Some of you know what it is like to be dog tired. We hear of someone today who on the dog tired scale was canine if not ca-ten. He had been on the go all around the area and everywhere he went, people came to him who were sick, and he healed them. At times the next situation presented itself before the first was resolved. He also was encountering people who were hungry, and even with few obvious resources, he managed to feed them. He was traveling by foot or by boat hither and yon. Who knows where he was staying from night to night. The travel with lack of accommodations had to be exhausting. It also had to be exasperating dealing with his closest associates who, even though they had seen him do amazing things time after time, still had difficulty trusting that he could come through for them as well as for so many others. Then word had come that the one who had prepared the way for his coming, John the Baptist, had recently been executed by King Herod. This was because John had spoken truth to power and the one in power had not liked it. So Jesus was not only mourning this loss; the execution made it absolutely clear the potential cost of his commitment to do God's work. On top of that, various religious officials had challenged and criticized Jesus. He worked to redirect their priorities, but one thing had become very clear - he needed a break. So he went to the beach on the Mediterranean, a place where he had not been in his time of ministry. The gospel account tells us that he did not want anyone to know he was there. Yes, Jesus was divine, but he was also human, and we see a bit of his humanity here. He knew when he needed fresh wind to fill his sails for the journey ahead and he took steps seeking rest and renewal so that he could resume his very active and demanding ministry.

We hear of someone else today who also had to be dog tired. It was a woman whose little daughter was struggling with what was understood to be an unclean spirit. In other situations that were described in such a way in the gospel accounts, it often sounded like someone with severe epileptic seizures where a parent would be concerned that the girl might injure herself, much less have a normal healthy life. How many doctors or people who claimed they could get rid of such a spirit had the mother of this child sought out? Had she spent all the money she had looking for something that would benefit her daughter? We don't know much about her. What we do know is that this resourceful woman, exploring every option, somehow heard that a man who had healed others some distance away was at the beach on retreat. She knew it was against all convention for her as a gentile woman to approach him as a Jewish man, but her child's need pushed her right through these cultural boundaries. She might have been less determined if it had to do with her own health situation, but this was for her child, so with a new glimmer of hope, she bull dogged ahead. The child was under someone else's care while she searched for this someone who might be able to help her. When she found where this purported healer was, it was clear that she had gotten beyond the point where she was no longer too dignified to beg. She bowed down at his feet and asked that he cast the spirit out of her daughter.

This is where we hear Jesus say something very surprising for us: "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." How are we to understand this? The unnamed woman was begging on behalf of a child, but Jesus uses the word 'children' to refer to the children of Israel, those of Jewish descent. His early ministry had focused on this group of people, and even with such limits on his mission, the needs were overwhelming. He speaks symbolically of 'food', because the woman was not seeking food, but healing for her daughter. And he uses the word 'dogs' in referring to a group of people, understood to be non-Jews, gentiles. Actually, the original Greek indicates that he referred to small dogs. And yet, that is still shocking

for us to hear Jesus say something like that in reference to a group of people. So instead of encountering the ‘come to me all you who are weary’ Jesus, she finds the ‘go away because I’m weary’ Jesus? Was he so compassion-fatigued, so dog tired at this point that he not only brushes off this gentile woman who approaches him with a dire need, but also insults her ethnicity by referring to gentiles as dogs? This is the One whose example we are to follow?

How does the gospel writer know of this encounter? Jesus had gone away to be by himself and so there are only two people present. The unnamed woman might well have shared of her encounter and how the story turned out, but it is a bit more likely that Jesus later told his followers of this encounter, as being among the stories that got passed down about him from which the gospel writer drew. If Jesus had told this story on himself, some would suggest that he told it to his followers with a gleam in his eye, as those who would have been convinced that he wouldn’t have actually said that to the woman. Such a statement about throwing the children’s food to the dogs or even the puppies sounded more like an insult that some of the Jewish religious authorities of that time would have said. They were the ones who were so focused on Jewish purity practices that helped keep them separated from those impure or ‘dirty’ gentiles. The account we find in Mark could have been how it all really happened or perhaps how Jesus embellished the story a bit to make himself look bad in order to focus on the strength of the woman’s response to him, to help Christians of Jewish origin realize there really is enough of God’s good news for everyone.

In the story, what was the woman’s response to the put-off put down? “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” She doggedly stays focused on seeking what her little daughter needed, expressing her rationale with a sense of humor. Then Jesus said to her, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.” When the woman went home, she found that her daughter had been healed. There really was enough of God’s good news so that there was some for everyone. After this encounter, Jesus no longer limits his ministry only to the children of Israel, but expands into gentile territory.

We see the woman’s dogged faith, that relentlessly, persistently advocates for the need of a weaker one in need. Were that there were more with that kind of doggedness, who showed determination in their pursuit of what’s best for those with the least ability to get it on their own. And we see that Jesus’ faith is dogged as well. It is not a stubborn faith, where he is inflexible or intractable in his direction or in the boundaries for his ministry. He shows himself doggedly determined to not only seek rest and re-creation, but to also seek God’s direction and power to do what he was called to do. The kind of faith we see in this woman and in Jesus is possible for us as well, because we have a God, whose dogged love, compassion, and faithfulness can inspire our own. May it be so.