

SERMON: To Honor the Poor

TEXT: James 2:1-17 Mark 7:24-37

That man Jesus – the one you call Lord and Savior – just called me a dog. A dog! You don't know how that hurt me. I mean, I know I'm just a woman – and not one of the chosen people – but, a dog? Less than human? Nobody even knows my name. I'm just the one Jesus called a dog.

I was terrified that day. It wasn't my place as a woman to approach any man, much less Jesus. I had no right to be there. But I was desperate.

I set aside concern for myself for the sake of my daughter. She was possessed with an unclean spirit. She was very, very sick. The days were long with her ranting and raving. She would say vile, ugly things; she would scratch at herself, tear at her clothes and her hair, and throw things at me; she would soil the bed and not let me clean it up. The nights were even worse. Her nightmares had her screaming in terror and she would shake violently and foam at the mouth.

Who was this child? It wasn't long ago that she was happy and carefree. I didn't know what to do! I didn't know where to turn or how to help her. I was desperate.

So when I heard the commotion and people talking that Jesus was in town, I knew I had to get to him.

We all knew who he was. The healer, the miracle man, was all the Jews ever talked about. He was holy, they said. He knew the scriptures, he taught about God as if God was his own Father. He was so wise, and full of love for everyone. Every conversation about him came down to people wondering aloud whether he was their Messiah. They were nervous and excited and hopeful all at the same time. Of course, none of it meant much to me, until I needed him.

Jesus was my last and only hope. My daughter needed a healer, and I needed a Savior. I hoped he had enough love to give some to a lowly woman, a foreigner, a Gentile.

So, with fierce determination and a love for my daughter that knew no bounds, I set out to cross some boundaries.

I snuck into the house where he was staying. When I saw him I dropped to my knees and begged. “My daughter, she has a demon, you have to help her.”

That's when he said it. I remember every word. Each one cut like a knife. "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

He called me a dog. He called my daughter a dog. Now, I understand that many of you people in this day and age love your dogs and treat them like members of your family, even treat them better than other people sometimes. But back in my day, to call someone a dog was the insult of all insults. Dogs were among the lowest of all creatures. This loving, healing Jesus – the one you call the Good Shepherd and the Light of the World – the Redeemer whom you worship and adore, called me a dog.

I was stunned at first. Then suddenly I was talking back to him, correcting him, telling him he was wrong. The words came out before I realized what I was doing. "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." From this man who supposedly loved so much and could do so much, I was demanding that he give just a tiny bit of that love to me. I'm a dog? Fine. Then let me have the crumbs that fall from the table.

I realize that this is so uncharacteristic of the Jesus you know and love and worship. It also didn't fit the person that had been described to me. It just wasn't like him to be mean and insulting and dismissive to anyone.

Since then, I know that my story has been written down and many people have read it and studied it and theorized about it for generations.

Some think maybe it was just an act, and he was trying to teach his disciples a lesson. I guess some people think that Jesus was so focused on his mission to the Jews that he kind of had blinders on when it came to saving anyone else. So I was a distraction to his primary purpose. Then again, others think maybe Jesus was trying to make a point about politics or something.

If you wanted to excuse his behavior, you might argue that Jesus was tired and stressed out, and just wanted to get away from the crowds for a while. Maybe he had what you call *compassion fatigue* and needed time to care for himself and be renewed in body, mind, and spirit. I know you don't want to think that Jesus could be overwhelmed or caught off guard or lose his patience. On the other hand, you do believe he was fully human, right?

And since he was fully human, perhaps he could be challenged to grow and change just like everyone else. I didn't approach him with the intention to confront him or get the best of him or win an argument with him. I was just desperate to get help for my daughter. I had nothing to lose, so I took a risk – a big risk. I was a woman, a foreigner, and a Gentile. Three strikes against me. I didn't count. And I dared to challenge a man, a Jew, a miracle worker, maybe even the Messiah.

Much to my surprise, Jesus heard me. He listened. He saw me. He took his blinders off and opened his mind and he realized that my need was more important than my station in life. And the fact that I trusted him to help me – and I demanded that he be true to his character – showed him my faith. If I was a dog, I was at least worthy of a few crumbs of blessing.

At that moment, Jesus honored me. He brought me up to the level of the others in the room. He put a woman on equal footing with a man. He chose to bless me as the chosen people are blessed. He made me a priority and gave me a place in the family.

As I understand it this is now the very foundation of your religion. Your belief in Jesus the Christ commands you to love your neighbor as yourself. TO HONOR THE POOR is woven in to the very fabric of your faith.

I read that letter of James in your Bible. He wrote about how the Christians favored the rich and dishonored the poor. And he questioned whether those attitudes and actions were in keeping with their belief in Christ. He wrote, “Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you? You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.... Mercy triumphs over judgment.”

That’s my favorite line. Mercy triumphs over judgment. It shouldn’t matter where a person comes from or how they live or what they look like. It shouldn’t matter whether a person is rich or poor. Every person matters. Every person is to be honored. Every person is worthy of love and mercy and justice.

Even Jesus learned this lesson, and his ministry expanded to include all people. I pray that you will be willing to listen to those who cry for justice. I pray that you will open your minds and hearts to learn and grow as Jesus did. I pray that all you do will be for the glory of God!

AMEN.