

## 20<sup>th</sup> Sunday Ordinary Time, A

*“Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to him belong. They are weak but he is strong. Yes, Jesus loves me....”*

### **My Dear Brothers and Sisters,**

Most of us probably know that song well. For many of us, it describes the Jesus of our childhood, the Jesus of our growing up. It is simple. It is easy. It brings up images of a sentimental faith and a sweet, cuddly Jesus.

Those are images many still cling to. That’s how we want the world to be, the way we want to live, and who we want Jesus to be. The problem is that that kind of faith encourages us to be naive about God, life, and the world.

Look around us. Listen to our politicians. Calculate the cost of our wars. Study history. Walk amongst our guests at the food pantries. Talk with a cancer patient, their surviving spouse, or the alcoholic struggling to get well. Balance the family budget, work full time, raise your kids, be faithful in your marriage, and while you are at it remember to eat well and exercise. We all know what it is like. We have each got our own story. We need faith that can carry us through this life. Too often a sentimental faith becomes cynical, causes us to turn away from our difficulties, or leaves us feeling paralyzed. Life is neither simple nor easy. So why should we settle for faith that is?

We have all grown up since the days of singing **“Jesus loves me”** but has our faith grown up? Yes, Jesus loves us, but faith is not about

sentimentality and Jesus is not always soft and cuddly. Just ask the Canaanite woman in today's gospel. She will tell you all about it. She is not one of the chosen people. She is an outsider that the insiders don't want to be around. There is just something about her that is not acceptable. On top of that she is a woman in a society in which women have no real value or standing. To make matters worse she is a screamer with a crazy kid.

Life for her is neither simple nor easy. Sentimentality would not cut it. She needs help so she comes to Jesus. Yes, Jesus loves her, but he ignores her and then calls her a dog. So, what do we do with that?

Many have tried to explain it away. They offer excuses trying to justify Jesus' behavior. None are convincing. Maybe Jesus was just tired and having a bad day. Or he was teaching his disciples something. Really? At the expense of this woman and her daughter? Others say Jesus was testing her faith as if her life was not enough of a test. Maybe Jesus didn't understand the full extent of his mission and ministry. I suspect all the many excuses only highlight how embarrassed we are by this text.

Regardless of why Jesus did what he did we don't like it. It makes us uncomfortable. That's not the Jesus we want but that's the Jesus we get in today's gospel. And sometimes that's the Jesus we get in life.

There are days that we pray and get no answer. We come before God and offer all that we are and all that we have. We speak our words, express our feelings, and make known our needs and nothing happens. We wait.

We listen. God is silent. It is like talking to the walls of our room. If you have ever felt that way, then you know this Canaanite woman. **“Have pity on me, Lord, Son of David! My daughter is tormented by a demon.”** But he did not answer her at all. Instead, he talked about her to the disciples. She heard every word. **“I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,”** Jesus tells them. For her, however, there are no words, no gestures, no acknowledgment, no explanation. Nothing at all.

What do we do when that happens? Where do we go? Do we give up? Get mad? Quit the church? Sometimes someone will come to me and ask, **“Why? Why is God silent? Why am I ignored?”** I wish I knew. I don’t have an answer. Even if I did, I doubt it would be satisfactory. So, I do the only thing I can do. I sent them back. **“Go pray,”** I say. **“Just show up. Regardless of what God does or does not do you show up. Even if it seems God does not.”** That is what the Canaanite woman did.

Jesus was silent. She could have gone home, argued, or asked, **“Why?”** But she didn’t. Instead, she came closer to Jesus, fell before him, and kept on worshipping him saying, **“Lord, help me.”** That doesn’t make sense but that is what she does. This woman who was ignored and seemingly rejected by Jesus moves even closer, entering deeper into his silence, and begs like a dog. She continues to show up trusting that somehow it is enough to just be there before him. At some point, he must act. She doesn’t know when or what he will do. She only knows that she will be there when he does something.

This time he answers. **“It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs.”** He called her a dog, an animal. Those words sound so harsh, so mean, so wrong. They are. But maybe they are not about Jesus or the woman. Jesus is naming the reality of the world in which they both live. The reality is that there are children and there are dogs. We see it every day. Some have while many do not. Some are in and others are out, for some life flourishes. Others struggle to make it another day. Children and dogs.

They did not make it that way. It was like that before either one of them was born. It was that way before they met, and it is still that way today. That doesn't make it right and we should do all we can to change it. However, that is the world in which we must pray, the world in which we must live our faith, the world in which we must learn to show up. That is the world in which Jesus and this Canaanite woman meet. Life is neither simple nor easy and dogs don't eat children's food in this world.

The woman knows this. She even agrees with Jesus. **“Please, Lord, for even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of their masters.”** She has again found a way to show up and be present even when it seems everyone and everything is against her. This time Jesus speaks and acts. **“O woman, great is your faith,”** he tells her. At that very hour, her daughter is healed.

So, what do we do with that? Some say she finally wore him down and Jesus relented to get her to be quiet and go away. That sounds more like

what we do. Some say she was rewarded for her persistence. Maybe, but you and I both know of persistence that did not get rewarded. So, what is the difference? Others suggest Jesus realized he was wrong and changed his mind. Perhaps.

### **My Dear Brothers and Sisters,**

I don't know why Jesus acted the way he did. Maybe we don't need to know. Maybe this story is not even about Jesus. It is about us, our faith, and our world. Life is difficult. Deep abiding faith is a real struggle. The world is broken and divided into children and dogs. In the dog days of life, all we can do is continue to show up and that is enough. God may or may not do what we want. It doesn't matter. To not show up is only to deepen the divide. To turn away means that we would not be there when God does act. We will miss it. We will miss the moment of healing, the words of forgiveness, the acts that transform. We will never know that Jesus does love us. **Amen.**