

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

1045 Old Academy Road
Fairfield, Connecticut 06824

Telephone: 203-259-5596



Date: July 28, 2013
Sermon Title: God's Dog
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Mark 7:24-30

Mark 7:24-30

From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Let's begin by reading together my poem, "God's Dog," based on this Scripture.

God's Dog (Mark 7:25-30)

He called me a dog.
People say
dog
is God
spelled backwards
then pause
like that's so deep
some fathomable mystery
to soften my misery

but it hurts
I don't care what higher purpose
lurks
beneath the curse
it hurts
to be called
a dog,
by God

but I do not yield
this dog will not be heeled
by God or anyone
I surprise myself, and him
I claw my way back
to human
my bark is sharp
"I am able"
said I to the Master
"to eat crumbs from your table."

"God's Dog." It's an ugly story, isn't it, our Scripture? That's part of what makes our Bible so great, so believable. The people in the Bible are real, vulnerable, human, susceptible. They are very much like us and all the people we know. They can be tempted, weak, angry. They can let us down, leave us puzzled, confused. Even Jesus.

In our Scripture for today, Jesus steps way out of his comfort zone. Now let me say right here, I'm a fairly straightforward, Orthodox, evangelical Christian. I believe that Jesus is the Son of God, the Savior of the world; he died on the cross for our sins, he was raised from the dead on Easter, and he's the second person of the Trinity. He is all that. And I'm still saying this was not an easy day for Jesus. He was out of his comfort zone.

The Bible tells us he was in Tyre, modern-day Lebanon, ancient Phoenicia, when he is confronted, challenged by a Greek woman from Syria. By every use of the word "other," this woman was "other." And Jesus treats her as such, as something "other," something different, something annoying, something to be avoided. She asks for help for her demon-possessed daughter. Jesus begs off, with a rather "racist" response, or at least xenophobic. Xenophobia is the fear of the other. Racism. Same thing.

Jesus says, "First, let the children eat all they want, for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs." *Their dogs*. Whoa. There's no dispute about this verse. Jesus is simply saying, "I've come for the children of Israel. You're not a child of Israel, you're not one of us. I'm here for them, first, and it's not right to take what's meant for them and give it to the likes of you." Except Jesus doesn't say "the likes of you." That's bad enough; he flat-out calls her a "dog." "What I've got," Jesus, "is not meant for dogs." Nice.

The lady doesn't miss a beat. She should be a saint. The Catholic Church is considering a few more saints. Pope John Paul, Pope John XXIII. They should add this lady: "Anonymous Greek Syrian Lebanese Lady." She can be the patron saint of "others." She squeezed a miracle out of God. That's what saints do. God has his laws, and saints convince God to break his own laws. That's what this lady, this "other," this "nobody" did. She convinced Jesus to set aside his priorities, his prejudices, his hang-ups, his standards, whatever was going on in his head, she convinced Jesus to overrule his own rules.

"Yes, Lord," she says, "but even the dogs under the table get to eat the children's crumbs." That's another "whoa," and I don't know which gets a bigger "whoa": Jesus's opening gambit, "don't bother me, dog," or that lady's response, "O.K, I'm a dog, but my pup still needs help." And she got it. Jesus affirmed her with the best affirmation of all; he answered her prayer, he met her need, her daughter was healed, the demon defeated.

Now, let's analyze this Scripture and apply it. That's what preaching is. We look at a Bible story and believe that somehow this story speaks to us today. So we began by admitting this story is a mystery. Nobody can tell you it's all figured out. Was Jesus having a bad day? Did he really dislike Lebanese, Syrian, Greek women? Or aggressive women? Or being disturbed? The Bible actually says, "Jesus went near Tyre, he entered a house and did not want anyone to know it." He was taking a break. Instead, this lady disturbs his peace, maybe woke him up, or interrupted him in prayer. Whatever, he didn't take it well.

Another thing is that Jesus was testing the lady, testing her mettle, seeing what she's made of. Is she just pushy, aggressive, annoying, demanding? One of those people with no sense of boundaries, no decorum? Or was she truly a seeker, someone yearning for faith, driven by a genuine, personal family crisis? She needed Jesus. And maybe being driven and aggressive isn't so bad.

Alida and I just got back from four wonderful days in Ludlow, Vermont. Surrounded by beauty, immersed in peace, the days were a little slice of

heaven. One morning, we visited the Shaw's supermarket, and as we entered, there was a help-wanted poster. Here is the top line of the help wanted poster: "Are you driven and aggressive?" That was the first requirement. *Are you driven and aggressive?* As we look at a complicated story, we want to know what's going on. Was Jesus testing her faith? Did she have to prove her need? Were her drivenness and aggressiveness proof of her faith and her need? Was Jesus struggling to overcome a bad day, a bad mood, bad judgment? Or was Jesus just being Jesus, pushing the envelope, making people think (including us, 2,000 years later), turning anything and everything into a "teachable moment"?

We ... don't ... know. The Bible gives us the bare outline of a very intriguing, complicated, somewhat unsatisfying story. And we are left to decide what to make of it.

You've probably already figured out that this sermon is "David Rowe's two cents on the Trayvon Martin/George Zimmerman tragedy." Not the trial. I can't figure out the trial — good, bad, or indifferent. I can't figure out the incident itself. So I'm not giving you my two cents on the trial or the incident.

But I think it's fair and right for our little church to grapple with the tragedy. Again, as I said earlier, that's what preaching is. "We look at a Bible story and believe that somehow the story speaks to us today." That's what Jesus did. He created stories, parables, and then dared us to apply them to our world.

Karl Barth, the great giant of Christian theology, said, "Preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other." Bring God's word and our world face to face.

When this Martin/Zimmerman tragedy unfolded, one of the first things I did was to imagine what would I do if I were Trayvon Martin's pastor? What would I do if I were George Zimmerman's pastor? What would I do if I got a phone call from Mrs. Martin and she said, "Trayvon's just been murdered. Can you come quick?" Or if George Zimmerman had grown up in our church, gone to our youth group, gone to Appalachia, and he called me that night, "Reverend, I just shot a kid and he's dead. Can you come here quick?"

That happens when you're a pastor. Bad things do happen to good people, and good people do do some bad things. And we are still their pastors. A few years ago, I was asked to do the funeral of a murder/suicide. A man killed his longtime partner then killed himself, and I was the pastor. And who was I the pastor for? Both people, represented by their loved ones. After all, who

did I meet with to plan the funeral? Who came to the wake? Who was I preaching to at the funeral? Who did I pray for at the service? For both of them. For the people who loved them both. People who liked them. Neighbors, friends, family. People who opened their hearts to each of them.

It was a tragedy, and into that tragedy I was invited to bring "the Good News." That's why I end up imagining what I would have done if I were Trayvon Martin's pastor or George Zimmerman's pastor. Would I have any "Good News" to bring?

There is a popular phrase I really like, although in today's political climate in this country, half the country hates it. It's attributed to the mayor of Chicago, Rahm Emanuel. "Never waste a crisis." I believe that wholeheartedly. Do any of us really believe the opposite, "Let's waste this crisis"? Seriously, think of any crisis you have ever faced — health, career personal. Don't you try to learn from it? And think of your loved ones. If anyone you care about goes through a real crisis — a car accident, failed relationship, bad business deal, a bad choice — don't you always try to help out by saying, "Let's see what you can learn from this." Wise people, loving people "never waste a crisis."

The Martin/Zimmerman tragedy tells us we have a crisis, or we still have a crisis. It goes by many names in the American conversation, but it's definitely in the conversation. Race. Identity. Ethnicity. Diversity. Tolerance. Profile. Stereotype. Some of the conversation is political, some practical, some philosophical, some is really ugly.

As Christians, shouldn't we at least do something about the ugly part? Look back at the story of Jesus in the lady from Lebanon. For me, there are two enduring lessons. One, sometimes you have to push. That's the lesson from the lady. Two, don't be ugly. That's a lesson from Jesus.

St. Paul spoke about growing up when he said, "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I acted like a child ... but when I grew up, I put away childish things." It's time for us as Americans to "put away childish things." Treating people like lessers, like others, like enemies — that's not grown-up behavior, certainly not as people of faith.

Paul goes even further, imagining a church where he says, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, but all one in Christ." What he's arguing for is a church where our Christlikeness transcends all our pettiness. And I use "pettiness" on purpose. Pettiness is smallness. In Christlikeness we see people in their fullness, all that they are, all that they can be, all that God created them to be.

No matter what you think Jesus was up to, that's the number-one take away, "don't be ugly." If you think he was being ugly on purpose, to teach us a lesson, then the lesson is "don't be ugly." If you think Jesus was just caught off guard and his calling her a dog makes your skin crawl, then the lesson is, "don't be ugly." You put the two lessons together, and you get that it's possible to push for your cause, to be aggressive and driven, and not be ugly, or get ugliness in return.

America is a grown-up nation now. We've gone through the burps of infancy and mistakes of childhood and the trials and tribulations of adolescence. We are a grown-up nation now. But in pettiness we see the smallness in others, we see only the attributes we choose to dislike. So we define someone by color, by size, by age, by gender, by image. In pettiness we define someone by our prejudices and fears. In pettiness we form our image of someone by the smallest of parts. Kids do that that, and when kids do that, we correct them. "Don't judge a book by its cover," we say, implying that there is so much more substance there. That's grown-up thinking. We need to be a grown-up nation.

Let me close with a little movie review. Friday night we held our occasional "Greenfield Hill Church at the movies" night, using the movie "The Other Son." I urge you to rent it or download it, although I'm about to ruin it for you. It's a Shakespearian/Biblical type story requiring the wisdom of Solomon to sort out. Two families, one Jewish Israeli, one Muslim Palestinian/West Bank. These two mothers give birth the same day at the same hospital when Iraq was shooting Scud missiles at Israel during the first Gulf War. During a power blackout, they get mixed up, with each given to the wrong mother. And now it's 18 years later. The Jewish boy is about to enter the Israeli army, and his pre-induction blood work exposes the mix-up. Suddenly the Israeli Jewish family has a Muslim Palestinian son, and the Palestinian/Muslim family has a Jewish Israeli son. Or not. Or who says?

The rest of the movie is a powerful, tender, modern parable about identity. Who are we? Who gets to decide? Is the Palestinian Muslim boy suddenly Jewish because his birth mother is Jewish? Is the Jewish Israeli boy really Muslim despite his bar mitzvah? And how does everyone else look at them now? Brothers, sisters, friends, buddies, girlfriend, neighbors. If you are not who you thought you were, but now you're one of them, after a lifetime of thinking of them as the enemy, then who are you? And who gets to decide?

What would happen if we actually broadened our definition rather than narrowing it? If we actually assumed the best rather than expecting the worst? If we actually saw ourselves in one another's eyes? If we actually

believed the high calling of our faith and chose to "love one another" rather than to limit our love?

Wouldn't it be nice if after all this Martin/Zimmerman tragedy and all the other tragedies of hatred and misunderstanding and fear, if after all these tragedies, we could end up where our Bible story ends up? Jesus affirms the generosity of spirit in the lady, affirms her drivenness and aggressiveness, affirms the justice of her cause, and says to her, 'For your good response, you may go home. The demon has left your daughter.' So the lady went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon had gone."

Jesus sets aside the ugliness of his own response, whatever its design, he sets it aside and achieves the healing, the miracle they both really wanted. In a grown-up America that can happen every day if we want it to

Let's close our service by singing our hope, Hymn No. 687,

*In Christ there is no East or West,
In Him no South or North;
But one great fellowship of love
Throughout the whole wide earth.*