

## Of Mice, Dogs and the Lion of Judah

Proper 15, Year A – Matthew 15:21-28

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, August 17, 2014

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

There's a children's story by C. S. Lewis, part of his famous *Chronicles of Narnia*, in which Reepicheep, the bravest and proudest mouse of all Narnia, plays a pivotal role in the great battle to save that world. At the end of the battle, Reepicheep finds himself in the presence of Aslan, the Great Lion, the High King of Narnia, only to suddenly realize the terrifying absence of something *very* important. In the heat of the fight, Reepicheep, the bravest and proudest mouse of all Narnia, has lost his tail.

"I am confounded," said Reepicheep to Aslan. "I am completely out of countenance. I must crave your indulgence for appearing in this *unseemly* fashion."

"...What do you want with a tail?" asked Aslan.

"Sir," said the Mouse, "I can eat and sleep and die for my King without one. But a tail is the honour and glory of a Mouse."

"I have sometimes wondered, friend," said Aslan, "Whether you do not think *too* much about your honour."

"Highest of all High Kings," said Reepicheep, "permit me to remind you that a very small size has been bestowed on us Mice, and if we did not guard our dignity, some (who weigh worth by inches) would allow themselves very unsuitable pleasantries at our expense."

"Why have all your followers drawn their swords, may I ask?" said Aslan.

"May it please your High Majesty," said the second Mouse, whose name was Peepiceek, "we are all waiting to cut off our own tails if our Chief must go without his. We will not bear the shame of wearing an honour which is denied to the High Mouse."

"Ah!" roared Aslan, "you have conquered me. Reepicheep, for the *love* that is between you and your people, you *shall* have your tail again."

There's no two ways around it. Jesus comes off as *distressingly* unkind in today's Gospel lesson from Matthew. Our informed, tolerant, politically correct selves practically curl up at the edges when Jesus puts the Canaanite woman in her place. Anyone who has looked at the books of ancient history knows that every ounce of wrath in the Hebrew Scriptures has come to bear on this woman's people. And here she is approaching a Jewish rabbi. What's more, she's a *woman*. This no-named woman has no authority, no social standing, no property, no status at whatsoever. And when, in her desperate need, she approaches Jesus, he calls her a dog, making her the most unclean, unworthy, un-person imaginable. In English we have a less polite word for dog. I have checked with people who know about first century language usage and they assure me that when Jesus spoke to this woman, his use of dog carried every bit of the weight of *that* word.

She should count herself lucky Jesus pays any attention at all. The Pharisees would have had absolutely no time to even *hear* such a woman. Any sensible teacher of the Torah would have taken great *offense* at her very *approach*, much less her audacity. The disciples find her cries irritating. Finally, Jesus is forced to turn to her and draw the line.

We've all done it. Sometimes we need to do it. We don't have the time. We have too much to do already. There is too much at stake. Our lives are crazy complicated enough. We can't take on one more thing. We can't get involved. Perhaps there is a hidden gem of Good News in here, for a high-tech, fast-paced, over-worked society like ours. Perhaps we could *use* a Messiah who knows where to draw the line. Perhaps we *need* a Savior who can just say no. Jesus isn't trying to be a superhero. Why should *we*?

But what happens next in this Gospel is perhaps one of the most remarkable exchanges in all of Jesus's public ministry.

Up to this point in Matthew's Gospel, the author has devoted line after line to accounts of Jesus' message being totally misunderstood. I've called it to your attention several times over the last several weeks. Time after time, the disciples fail to grasp the real *message* of the parables. The Pharisees are confounded and annoyed at Jesus for shaking their cage of rules and regulations. The people swarm around hoping for something wonderful to happen, another miraculous sign, another healing, another free meal, but in the process miss the point of Jesus's teaching about the Kingdom of God growing in their hearts.

Then along comes a woman, a *Canaanite* woman no less, an outcast, a throw-away, a *cur* rather than a person, who seems somehow to understand the whole thing completely. In her pithy little statement about dogs and tables and crumbs, she not only embraces Jesus's own metaphorical language, something the apostles can never quite manage, she makes an astonishing, refreshing claim – to *grace*. It's all so bold. In one sentence, it's all so insightful and understanding. To Jesus's ears, so used to hearing incredulity and misunderstanding, this one woman's claim is all so... terribly beautiful. Immediately, this Canaanite woman, this outsider, stands head-and-shoulders above everyone else that clamored around him.

Her faithful assumptions are strikingly simple. She *knows* Jesus can heal her daughter. On one hand, this Canaanite woman has rejected her role as submissive outsider, and boldly strikes out for justice. And on the other, she comes before this one who has what she needs and asks in all the humility of her station for just *her* portion of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus is thunderstruck. She *gets* it! No matter how tiny, how castaway, how insignificant she is from society's point-of-view, she is willing to struggle faithfully – even with God himself, if need be – to obtain the help and the healing she needs. And in so doing, she has grasped hold of something everyone else had failed to even recognize was theirs. She has assumed her rightful position in the Kingdom. She has become the first drop of the *flood* of outsiders who are to be welcomed by and *into* Christ's loving arms.

Today's Gospel is not about us grabbing for the reward that we deserve, but about faith in the grace that we need. It is about our struggles for justice, righteousness, and dignity – right up in God's face. It's about an insistent, nagging, perhaps even obnoxious faith that will continue to pursue what is right, even at the expense of every boundary. Maybe that's praying for peace and security for beleaguered war-torn millions around the world this very day. Maybe that's working for understanding and justice and tolerance in yet another hate-ravaged community just up the road. Maybe that's being genuinely open to and present with our own neighbor, in their front room, on our front porch, in a fear-filled hospital waiting room. Maybe that's wrestling for *our* healing directly with a God “in whom we live and move and have our being.”

We are a people constantly uttering, “Thy will be done,” to a lofty Lord enthroned above. But let us take seriously the faith of this one Canaanite woman, a faith that *way* too often stands head-and-shoulders above our own, that the Sustainer whom we serve, the Redeemer whom we love, is the Creator who remarkably, inexplicably made such creatures as us, even capable of surprising the divine consciousness. Then let us fervently pray that our Creator may regard us not with judgment, but with grace. Let us pray that our Redeemer may pour upon us not only the crumbs of his table, but the whole heavenly banquet. Let us pray that our Sustainer might satisfy our thirst for justice, our fervent desire for righteousness, our *longing* for our healing, and the healing of our world.

Listen! We just might hear a voice saying once again, “Ah! You have conquered me!”