

**“A Dogged Faith”**  
*A sermon preached by Rev. Daniel Smith*  
*At First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC*  
*August 14, 2005*

**Lesson: Matthew 15:21-28**

I came across an odd article this week in the Metro, you know, that free daily newspaper that litters the floors and empty seats of the T. The title of it was, get this, “Are you bored on the phone? Beware the Jerk-O-Meter.” The first line? “If you’ve ever wondered if that spouse, friend or co-worker on the other end of the phone is really paying attention, the “Jerk-O-Meter” may hold the answer.” Apparently, one of those geniuses over at MIT is developing software for cell phones that analyzes speech patterns. Using mathematical algorithms to measure levels of stress and empathy in a person’s voice, the software rates people - 0 to 100 - on how engaged they are in conversation. The best part of it is that when the software senses that the person on the other end of line is drifting or irritated, it will send the person an instant text message that will pop up on his or her phone and warn “Don’t be a jerk!” or “You could be a little nicer!”<sup>1</sup>

I read this article while taking a break from my sermon preparation. I was trying to figure out how to make sense of Jesus’ highly uncharacteristic attitude in the passage I just read. When I finished the “Jerk-O-Meter” article and got back to the gospel, I found myself subconsciously trying to text-message Jesus...“Don’t be such a jerk, man! ...You could be a little nicer you know!” Did you catch his encounter with the Canaanite woman? Did you hear what he said to her? This poor woman is suffering. Her daughter is sick. She’s desperate for his healing touch. His first response is silence, a not very Christ-like silence that seems to say “Talk to the hand, sister...I don’t have time for you now.” His disciples only encourage his disregard. “That’s right, Jesus. Send her away...this pagan is shouting at us and calling you Lord and Son of David like she’s one of us; she’s not even a Jew!” In fact, she was an outsider to them, a Gentile from the unfamiliar lands of Tyre and Sydon in the north country where Jesus and the disciples find themselves well outside of their usual sales territory in Galilee. She would have made that quintessential other, the Samaritan, seem like a next door neighbor. So Jesus for once agrees with the disciples. He says “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel!” Apparently, he can’t be bothered with her. Then, as if to add insult to injury, our fairest Lord Jesus tells her, “It’s not fair to take the children’s food and feed it to the dogs”. Whoa! Who IS this guy? Did he forget to eat his Wheaties that morning? Did he forget to take his meds? What is going on here?

First of all, you can bet there are scholars that have tried to clean Jesus up here, trying to pardon his first century French of essentially calling a woman a dog. They would tell us the connotations are not the same. I don’t buy it. He calls her a dog, plain and simple, and while I still feel tempted to call Jesus a jerk – with or without the Jerk-O-Meter -- I think I’ll err on the side of caution, not to mention doctrine, and simply call Jesus human. Fortunately, he eventually changes his speech patterns, recognizes this woman’s dogged faith, and finally heals her daughter as

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<sup>1</sup> Associated Press Article, “Are You Bored on the Phone? Beware the Jerk-o-Meter” in *The Metro* (Boston), August 12-14, 2005.

requested. If we can take comfort in Jesus' human needs to sleep, to eat, to weep and even to thirst from the cross. Perhaps we can also find some comfort in this unexpected lapse of loving kindness and in his need to change his mind.

Peter Hawkins of Boston University offers a bit of commentary that may help us to understand this, let's just call it fickle, behavior of Jesus. He writes: "Christians throughout the ages have proclaimed that "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (quoting Hebrews 13:8). The implicit teaching is that by being eternally the same, he is therefore divine: a Rock of Ages and, like the Father of Lights, beyond the shadows of changing. He is. But what of his humanity, which he shares with us through the mystery of incarnation? Tom Delay has recently reminded us that Jesus of Nazareth began his life as an embryo; he also died a thirty-something. Things happened in between. By virtue of his being flesh and blood...he must have moved from one place to another: learned a language, taken a first step, developed as a human being, even changed his mind."<sup>2</sup>

Thank you Peter Hawkins and thank you Tom Delay! I love these images! Move over Jesus the Savior, Jesus the teacher, and Jesus the guy in white robes who never spills on himself. Make room for Jesus the embryo and Jesus the pre-schooler! Make room for Jesus the learner! I hate to spoil the fun of thinking we've caught Jesus in some random act of unkindness (we have!), but as Hawkins suggest, we need to keep thinking. Fundamentally, we need to give Jesus room to learn and to grow, to be and to become fully human.

In this case, his teacher is no rabbi or high priest, but the Canaanite woman. She is an outsider and one who, as the hymn puts it, knows her need as deep as life. Jesus' put down seeks to draw a circle to shut her out. And yet, with nothing left to lose, she's already on her knees, she spins it on him and says: "Even dogs can eat food from their Master's table." He had to give it to her. She draws the wider circle and takes him in. In the face of her suffering, in the face of her dogged faith, humble yet confident, Jesus is reminded that he was trying to do the impossible; he was trying to place human limits on the divine love. He was trying to say "my love stops here, for these my people; it will stretch no further." The Canaanite woman somehow knows better. She knows, perhaps from her own undying love of her sick daughter, that you can't stop something that is infinite! She helps him to realize that doing so is like trying to cut space in half...it just doesn't work. God's infinite love is still and will always be growing within him, transforming him, enlarging his sense of purpose, and expanding his love to embrace ever-wider circles of God's children and creation. What we are witnessing here is a moment in which Jesus learns that his mission is not merely to change his world; but to change the world! If there's not room for her in the house of Israel, its time to move a bigger house, the 'household of God that has room for us all'.

In the end, this passage asks us at least two important questions that I trust will resonate in your hearts. The first is this, the question of the Canaanite woman. Where in your life are you feeling shut out by the limited human love of others? Where is someone trying to confine your spiritual growth and transformation that is, whether you know it or not, happening inside of you even as we speak? I pray its not something you encounter here in this household of God and yet I know we have our work to do. With other churches, on the right and left, we stand in constant need of the reminder that while Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and today and tomorrow, he is also ever changing, ever growing, ever becoming all the more inclusive. And so much our

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Hawkins, "The Living Word", *The Christian Century*, July 26, 2005.

churches! The Christian church in general seems to be losing its tolerance for this fundamental paradox that lies at the center of our faith. Women, gays and lesbians, people of other faiths and nations and the poor continue to hear from churches that they stand outside of the circle of God's love, as if there were rules written in stone two thousand years ago. With the dogged faith of the Canaanite woman, we better keep shouting. We better keep shouting until all of Christ's disciples can learn the lesson that God's love knows no border.

The second question is this; it's the one that Jesus asks: How is God's love growing within you, expanding your soul, calling you to draw ever-wider circles of love that will take others in? If Jesus needed help in coming to terms with this question, you better believe that we do too. If you think that you've already found your mission in life, that you've already arrived, that your life is already full, think again. It may well be time to change up your speech patterns and to realize that God's love is growing inside of you, even now.

With Christ, may we humbly continue to learn the lesson that our mission is not only to change our worlds; it is to change the world. Sound like a tall order? Thanks be to God, the source of infinite transformation, love and possibility. Amen.