“***Even the Dogs***” by S. Finlan. The First Church, Aug. 30, 2020

**Isaiah 56:6–7**

6And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant—  
7 these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer . . .  
for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.

**Matthew 15:21–28**

21 Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. 22Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” 23But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” 24He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” 25But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” 26He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” 27She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” 28Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

Jesus clearly seems to enjoy the sassy Canaanite woman who told him that even the dogs get to share scraps that fall off the children’s table. He rewards her persistence, saying “Woman, great is your faith!” He takes no offense at her sarcastic poke at Jewish pride (“dogs” being a put-down of Gentiles). Matthew includes this account, but does he appreciate that Jesus and the woman are sharing a moment of understanding, and a shared mockery of Jewish pride? Possibly. At first glance, Matthew seems to show some bias. Matthew, alone among the four evangelists, says that Jesus came only to preach to the lost sheep of Israel. And he seems to have Jesus show some of that prejudice in his remark about dogs. Yet, he then has Jesus reward her when she makes a wisecrack about dogs getting the scraps. Either Jesus has changed his attitude in the middle of this conversation, letting go of a bias against Gentile “dogs,” or else his remark about dogs was intended to be humorous in the first place, and he was sharing with the woman an inside joke about prejudice.

It’s not wholly clear to me, however, whether Matthew understands that. Either Matthew transcends his own nationalism here, or he doesn’t quite know what to make of this strange story. But the only interpretation that I find historically plausible and consistent with Jesus’ teachings elsewhere, is that Jesus is sharing with this woman a moment of levity about, and contempt for, prejudicial labels.

And so it rings a bell with the radical passage from Third Isaiah that I read first, and which Jesus himself quoted when he overturned the tables of the money changers at the temple. God here promises to bring devout foreigners to his holy mountain, “for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” (Isa 56:7). These foreigners keep the Sabbath and hold fast to the covenant. What is meant by holding fast to the covenant? Is it keeping all the commands of the Torah? Or is it a more spiritual loyalty to certain supreme values, linked with a concept of an agreement and a relationship to God, and reverence for the sabbath? The passage speaks of prayer and covenant, and shows God’s kindness and willingness to extend fellowship to Gentiles. Verse 8 says God is gathering the outcasts, both “of Israel” and “others.” So there is specific attention to others, that is, Gentiles.

Third Isaiah seems to anticipate the openness to Gentiles that we will see in the teachings of Jesus and Paul, and in the emergence of churches with mixed Jewish-Gentile membership. When Jesus overturns the tables of the money changers, at least in the version in Mark, he says “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’? But you have made it a den of robbers” (11:17). Interestingly, both Matthew and Luke leave out the phrase “for all the nations,” but Mark correctly retains that phrase, a crucial part of what motivates Jesus, and what motivated Third Isaiah earlier. I think Mark got it right on the inclusion of that key phrase. It seems the four evangelists took turns getting it right on certain incidents in the life of Jesus.

Jesus includes the Gentiles in the promises, although this was counter-intuitive for all four of the evangelists, especially for Matthew. There is a certain tension throughout the gospels between the evangelists’ instincts and Jesus’ radical openness to the Gentiles. There is a similar tension between the evangelists’ instinctive prioritizing of men over women, and Jesus’ openness to women, as seen in his conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well, and in his appearing first to the women, after the resurrection. Finally, there is some tension between the evangelists’ instinctive adult emphasis and Jesus’ openness to, and advocacy for, children.

But we should be used to that tension, by now. How many times did Jesus have to say to his apostles, “oh you of little faith?” (Matt 6:30; 8:26; 16:8); or “Do you not understand?” (Mark 4:13)? Jesus’ truth is so overwhelming that the whole history of human domination, with its low valuation of women and children, gets overturned. It is Spirit that needs to become dominant, and that will reverse many things that have been considered normal. Spirit dominance, of course, happens through grace and persuasion rather than through force.

Sometimes we fall into the category of not understanding, especially when having new experiences or having a changed environment, where we need Jesus’ help to get the true insight. But we know that Jesus rewards persevering effort, as long as we are willing to let the Spirit work on us, so that we are molded as necessary. When we have been molded by God, then our requests are the right requests, and not selfish ones, or ones that cannot helpfully be granted. This mother in today’s passage was dedicated to getting what her daughter needed. She put herself on the line, and she stuck her neck out, to help her daughter. She touched Jesus’ compassion, and he acted for her. He *included* her and her daughter. He touched them with his love.

I believe *we* are included, too, but often we find that we pray for others, and they are *not* miraculously healed. It makes us wonder why. Things are different, now that the Son of Man is not physically present. Jesus takes care of everyone’s *long-term* needs, but we don’t usually get instantaneous healings. Blessed are we if we continue to pray, if we persist in prayer, and if we entrust everyone to his care, knowing that he will set us all in the right place in the end. He will include us in his family.

And there is no harm in entrusting everybody to his care, even the *actual* dogs . . . and cats and fish and birds that we love so much. They are a part of our appreciation of goodness and beauty, and they become a permanent part of our families and our memories. It’s alright if we open our hearts to Jesus, entrusting everyone and everything to him. All good things come from God, and the love we give to our family and our animal friends is not lost.

There are many different circumstances of life that Christians have experienced. Sometimes they might have felt they were only getting crumbs from the table, but Jesus wants us all to feel like members of the family, sitting together at the table. “Fear not, little flock; it is the Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” he said (Luke 12:32). He wants us to feel at home in his community, and not to feel like we have to be content with scraps. We have a place at Christ’s table, in the family of God.