

*Doggedly*  
*Whitefish UMC*  
*Matthew 15:21-28*

- You probably know by now that our family loves dogs. We subscribe to the saying that a “house without a dog is not a home” and other sappy sayings that dog lovers have created and that cat lovers abhor. Although we are presently without a pup in our home, our dog Snappy was a perfect example of where the term “doggedly” is derived.
- Where tennis balls were concerned, Snappy was willing to ignore offers of raw meat in favor of a game of fetch. He was tennis ball-obsessed--Something like the dachshund in this video. It can be cute but very annoying.
- For Jews in the first century, during the time of Jesus, dogs weren’t cute, lovable, or friendly—kind of like the one in this joke:
- A man walked into a bar and sat down next to a man with a dog at his feet. “Does your dog bite?” he asked. “No,” was the reply. So he reached down to pet the dog, and the dog bit him. “I thought you said your dog doesn’t bite!” he said. “Well, that’s not my dog!”
- This passage of scripture that *Anna* just read has troubled me since the first time I heard it as a child. I have learned that it bothers other readers, too, including some pastors who refuse to preach on it when it comes up every three years in the lectionary.
- It does raise troubling questions about Jesus doesn’t it? Why would Jesus respond so harshly to a woman asking for healing for her

child? Why, even though the story turns out positively in the end and the woman's daughter is healed, would Jesus first refer to her as a *dog*? And what was it that caused Jesus to change his mind? Was it the woman's wit, her faith, her deference, her persistence, her desperation?

- The main character of this story is a mother who displays real “chutzpah.” I have heard one black preacher refer to her as “one uppity and pushy sister.” She gets in Jesus' face, begging him to heal her daughter. Her daughter is disturbed, mentally ill, literally possessed of a demon. There is only one problem: she is one of the “dogs.” It's an insulting metaphor, a derogatory term popular at the time for describing all gentiles, all non-Jews. It means she has no business being in the company of a

Jew, much less the Messiah. The social gap is enormous. She is like an illegal alien marching into the Oval Office to see Texas Governor Perry. Or like a bag lady trying to make an appointment with Steve Jobs. She begs Jesus to heal her daughter, but it sounds as if he doesn't have time for her.

- “Stand in line and take your turn. The children (of Israel) get fed first. If there's any left over, the dogs get it.” Jesus may be tired, he may be annoyed—the scriptures say he is trying to remain hidden—and we can all identify with his situation. But does he have to call this woman a dog? Scholars tell us that Jesus doesn't tell the mother no outright. He is concerned primarily with the priority of his mission to the Jews, his own people. Some scholars also remind us that the use of the term

“dogs” in the original Greek is diminutive—literally “little dogs—house pets.” Yet Jews didn’t keep dogs as pets, and we are left with Jesus’ rather harsh rejection of a mother in need.

- And yet the woman does not back down. Dog indeed! She keeps right on nipping at Jesus’ heels, which showcases not only her debating skills, and her wit, but also her faith. She is bold! She dares to take his metaphor and turn it back on him. “Children get fed before the dogs? You’ve got that right, Lord! But even the dogs get to eat the children’s crumbs—even the pets get the scraps that fall from their master’s table!” She is arguing that even on his own terms, there should be something from him—some scrap of grace—for someone like her who comes to him in faith. She is

challenging him on a number of levels. “What are you going to do, Lord? Judge me by externals only, or judge me by my heart?” And what about my deep need here? You say you welcome children—what about my daughter?”

- This passage is rich with possibilities for interpretation, but what I want to focus on today is the question of persistence. What do we do when we come to God with our deep needs, and God says “NO!”? The story of the Canaanite woman turns out well in the end, doesn’t it? And it’s a great story...do you know that it is the only place in the Scriptures where Jesus loses an argument, changes his mind? And all because some “uppity and pushy sister”—an outsider, a woman without a husband, is **dogged** in her determination—

enduring humiliation at first, but prevailing in the end.

- This story gives hope to all of us who have prayed fervently for the healing of those we love so much. And it offers hope to those of us who, collectively, have been put outside of the circle of acceptance and inclusion. We may have been excluded by race, by social and economic status, or by our sexual orientation. And so we pray that if Jesus could change his mind for the Canaanite woman, maybe his church will change its mind about us.
- And yet for many of us who pray for healing, for inclusion, for acceptance, for a scrap of grace, the answer continues to be a resounding: “No! it’s not your turn!” And what are we to do then?

- One of the best parts of being your pastor is to sit with you, to pray with you, for the wholeness that I know God desires for you and for the ones you love. And one of the worst parts of being your pastor is to sit with you, to pray with you, and struggle with you when you don’t receive, at least to our discernment, the answers to prayer that we seek. We can perceive blessing, even in suffering, and yet loved ones die of painful diseases, relationships are broken, and children struggle unbearably.
- Is there one of us who hasn’t wondered: “Come on, God, even the dogs get scraps of grace and deliverance!” “What about me and those I love? Where are you?”
- Contemporary historians have asserted that Winston Churchill may have been one of the last great world leaders. I have been drawn to

him over the years for a number of reasons—for his wit, his rather comical appearance, his leadership qualities, and most especially for his tenacity in the face of adversity. I derive inspiration from the fact that Churchill’s life was not one of constant success. In fact he failed almost as often as he succeeded, and though he led Great Britain to victory in World War II because of his determination and courage and persistence, less than a year later, he was voted out of office. Yet one of Churchill’s greatest and most profound statements to the world came in Britain’s darkest hour during the war: in the face of almost certain defeat, he spoke these words to the people: “Never give up, never give up, never give up.”

- And so it must be for us. Although there are times when we must give up on failed relationships, on loved ones who betray our trust, on situations that are sure to destroy us, we must never give up our prayers for wholeness to God.
- For we are not alone. Remember these words of the Psalmist:
- *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?  
How far from saving me, the words I groan!  
I call all day, my God, but you never answer,  
All night long I call and cannot rest.  
Yet, Holy One, you  
Who make your home in the praises of Israel, in  
you our ancestors put their trust,  
They trusted and you rescued them;  
They called to you for help and they were  
saved, they never trusted you in vain.*

- This prayer is not only the expression of the experience of the people of Israel, but also the fullness of our Christian experience. When Jesus spoke these words on the cross, total aloneness and full acceptance touched each other. In that moment of complete emptiness, all was fulfilled. In that hour of darkness, new light was seen. While death was certain, life was affirmed. Where God's absence was most loudly expressed, God's presence was most profoundly revealed.
- It is into this mystery that we enter when we pray.
- And we are not alone. Over the centuries, it is comforting, for me at least, to know that others have struggled with these same questions. One of them, the great Christian mystic, Julian of Norwich, wrote from her anchorhold in the Cathedral at Norwich in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. There she received all kinds of folks coming to her with

their problems and their prayers. (She functioned a lot like Lucy in the Peanuts cartoons, sitting at her booth with the sign: "the doctor is in".)

Amidst all their petitions, she experienced what she called "showings" or visions of Christ, and her understanding of the nature of God even amidst the horrors of the plague that swept Europe offers hope and assurance to us today:

- [The words] "You will not be overcome, were said very insistently and strongly, for certainty and strength against every tribulation which may come. God did not say: You will not be assailed, you will not be belaboured, you will not be disquieted, but God said: You will not be overcome. God wants us to pay attention to God's words, and always to be strong in our certainty, in well-being and in woe, for God loves us all and delights in us."

- But when we don't *feel* this assurance of which Julian speaks so beautifully, what are we to do?
- Richard Foster, the writer and teacher of spiritual formation, suggests two practices. First, pray the prayers of lament. Although in our sanitized world, they have become lost, the bible is full of them. We find them in the Psalms of Lament. The ancient singers really knew how to complain, and their words of anguish and frustration can guide our lips into the prayer we dare not pray alone. We prayed one of them this morning, Psalm 42—"I say to God, my rock, 'Why have you forgotten me?'" These lament psalms teach us to pray our inner conflicts and contradictions. They allow us to shout our feelings of abandonment, and yet encourage us to stay connected to God, our rock.
- A second thing we can do when we are buffeted by the silence of God is to beat upon what is called "the cloud of unknowing" with what Foster calls "a short dart of longing love." We may not see the end from the beginning, but we can keep on doing what we know to do. Pray, listen, worship, carry on the duty of the present moment. Do what we do in the light of God's love and in the dark of God's absence. We ask and continue to ask even though there is no answer. We knock and continue to knock even though the door remains shut.
- We become, like the unnamed Canaanite woman, yes, even like Snappy and the sweet little dachshund, dogged in our pursuit of God and the wholeness God desires for us. In the words of the Psalmist, "O my God, deep calls unto deep...." And we remember, "Hope in God whom again we shall praise, our help, and our God."
- May we become many "pushy and uppity sisters and brothers" in our prayers for justice, mercy,

healing, and compassion. May we pray doggedly,  
never giving up.

- Today and always, Amen.