

Gone to the Dogs

August 17, 2008

(Pentecost 14 - Year A)

Matthew 15: 10-28

St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas

Ever since I announced from this pulpit a few months ago that I am now the proud owner of a dog, I have had several parishioners ask me when they are going to begin hearing dog stories from the pulpit, specifically dog stories used as sermon illustrations.

Well, I did a computer search of the four Gospels of Jesus Christ that are included in the Bible, and there are only 4 instances in the Gospels that make reference to dogs.

And, luckily, one of those 4 stories is included in the Gospel reading from Matthew that we hear this morning.

Our little dog named Grady is a 5 month old puppy.

We have done a good job of feeding him only dog food - and not letting him eat people food.

Yet, we have discovered that Grady is better than any mop or broom that we have ever had in our house.

Because Grady loves to lick up and eat even the smallest scraps of human food that accidentally fall from our dinner table.

He doesn't complain or whine at all.

For when Grady licks up the smallest morsels of our food, he acts as if he is feasting on a banquet.

In the Gospel of Matthew, the non-Jewish Canaanite woman comes to Jesus and asks for Jesus to heal her daughter.

At first, Jesus tries to brush her off and give this non-Jewish woman the cold shoulder.

Jesus says to her:

"I was sent only to the Jewish people.

Therefore it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

However, the Canaanite woman is persistent in asking for help.

And she puts the ball back in Jesus' court saying:

"Yes, Lord.

Yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.”

Now that I have a dog, this biblical imagery is even more vivid to me. First of all, Jesus equates the non-Jewish people, the Gentiles, to being like pet dogs.

And, secondly, this non-Jewish Canaanite woman reminds us that dogs are grateful for any amount of people food that they can lick up. For the non-Jewish people are grateful for any amount of grace and promise that falls from the Jewish table.

We tend to forget that Judaism is not usually a religion that you choose. Being Jewish means that you are part of a heritage, a part of a lineage of ancestors that makes you a part of the Jewish people.

Now I did not grow up with a Jewish mother or a Jewish father. I was not ritually circumcised when I was 8 days old like Jewish boys are.

Instead, I was born into a non-Jewish family.

I was born as a Gentile and I continue to live as a Gentile.

Like the Canaanite woman, I was born as a pet dog, a dog who is happy to lick up the scraps of grace and promise that fall from the Jewish table.

In the last few weeks, I have begun to develop a friendship with Rabbi Mordechai Rotem.

Rabbi Rotem is the rabbi at the reform Jewish temple in Waco, the Temple Rodef Sholom.

A week ago Friday night, in observance of the Jewish Sabbath, I attended the Shabbat service at their Temple.

I did not wear my clerical collar.

Instead, I sat in the pews with all the other worshipers.

The worshipers at the Temple used an organized Prayer Book, which immediately made me feel comfortable.

The worship service was conducted in both English and Hebrew, with the words printed in both languages.

With the limited training that I had with Hebrew while in seminary, I was able to follow along fairly well.

Now, I had never attended a Jewish worship service before.
Yet, I was as happy as a little Gentile puppy to lick up the tiny morsels
of grace and promise that fell from that Jewish table.

As I sat in the pews of Temple Rodef Sholom, my mind could not help
but rewind to the passage from the Letter to the Romans that we
read 2 weeks ago in church.

In that reading from Romans, the Apostle Paul writes about the Jewish
people, saying:

“They are Israelites - and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the
covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises;
To them belong the patriarchs, and from them...comes the Messiah.”¹

And as I sat in the pews of Temple Rodef Sholom, I was as grateful as a
puppy to realize that, because I am a follower of Jesus Christ, I
have become Jewish, as well.

I have become one of God’s chosen people.

For to the Hebrew people, God made a promise, a covenant, that the
Jews would be God’s chosen people.

God made a promise to Abraham, the father of the Hebrew people, that
Abraham’s descendants would be given a land and a heritage and
would be blessed as God’s chosen people.²

For to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of
the law, the worship, and the promises.

Yet, because Jesus listened to the plea of that Canaanite woman and was
willing to heal her non-Jewish daughter, Jesus has shown us that
all of us are now God’s chosen people.

Because to Jesus, none of us are Jew or Greek or slave or free or male or
female any more.³

All of us have received the crumbs that have fallen off of the Jewish
table.

¹ See Romans 9: 4-5

² See Genesis 12: 1-3

³ See Galatians 3:28

As I sat in pews of Temple Rodef Sholom, I was as happy as a puppy
because:

Even though I am a Gentile, I have been adopted by baptism as God's
son.

Even though I am a Gentile, I have been given the Hebrew law of loving
God and loving my neighbor.

Even though I am a Gentile, I have been given Abraham and Sarah as
my father and mother in faith.

Even though I am a Gentile, I have been given the worship of one God.

Even though I am a Gentile, I have been given the promise, the promise
that I am chosen and blessed.

For our Jewish brother, Jesus, has opened the way of life to *all people* -
So that to *all of us* belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the
giving of the law, the worship, and the promises.

However, God has not given us the scraps that fall from the table to lick
up.

Instead, God spreads a banquet before us each and every Sunday.

God puts a feast of bread and wine on this Table and we are no longer
dogs licking the floor.

God has made us worthy to stand before him at our master's Table, to
receive the Promise:

The Promise that we are loved and accepted and forgiven and included.

One of the dog stories in the Bible is that the non-Jewish, Canaanite
woman pleads with Jesus to heal her daughter, pointing out that
even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.

And Jesus listens to her - and makes her an honorary Jew.

For when the good news has gone to the dogs,

All of us, *all of us*, become God's chosen people.

AMEN.