

When Religion Goes to the Dogs
by Durrell Watkins, M.A., M.Div.
Sunshine Cathedral August 3rd, 2008
Matthew 15.21-28

My great-aunt Gladys and her husband Arthur, like most couples, had their ups and downs. I remember one day at breakfast while Uncle Arthur was enjoying his morning coffee, Aunt Gladys came up behind him and hit him in the back of the head with a rolled up newspaper! He shrieked out, "What is wrong with you, woman?!"

Aunt Gladys said, "I found a cocktail napkin in your jacket pocket with the name "Marianne" written on it, that's what's wrong with me!"

"Sugar Plum , calm down" Uncle Arthur said calmly. "Yesterday at the dog track I bet on a dog named Marianne. I just wrote down the name so I wouldn't forget which dog I wanted to put money on." And that settled the matter, until the next morning.

Again, Uncle Arthur was enjoying his morning coffee when Aunt Gladys came up behind him and hit him in the back of the head with the enormous family bible. "What was that for?" he demanded. To which Aunt Gladys said, "The dog you bet on at the track just called and asked to speak to you."

Our Executive Director, Ed Johnson, calls this "Dog Sunday" because of the Gospel reading where Jesus responds to a woman's plea for help by comparing her to a dog. It seems uncharacteristically mean of Jesus, but if we do the work of putting that discourse in the larger biblical context we may find that this is actually a very positive, affirming, and liberating passage after all. But first, we need to do some digging.

Prejudice is actually addressed throughout our scriptures. Sometimes we see people giving in to the temptation of branding the Other and demonizing them, but then some prophet or teacher will come along and challenge that and call people back to a message of welcome and inclusion.

For example: In Deuteronomy 20, the Israelite people have a list of enemies. And the writer of that passage says that their enemies should be utterly destroyed. Verse 17 says unequivocally and unapologetically, "...you shall not leave a single soul alive. You must doom all – the Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, Jebusites, AND the CANAANITES..."

The Canaanites are an ancient enemy of Jesus' people, and Jesus' bible says that they ought to be slaughtered! Luckily, Jesus doesn't seem to take that passage literally or perhaps he feels it is not appropriate in his day, but we can clearly see why his disciples' first impulse was to ignore her or send her away...she is part of a group that the bible condemns. But Jesus stands in a long prophetic tradition, and he may just wind up re-thinking that condemnation and offering a more hopeful message in the end.

Other prophets had done as much, so there was precedence. Syria was an ancient enemy as well, but the prophet Elijah healed the Syrian General Naaman of his skin disease.

The story of Jonah tells of a man who is called to go to Ninevah to preach to the citizens of that large city. But the problem is, Ninevah is the capital of Assyria, and Assyria is one of those big Empires that have oppressed Israel . Jonah doesn't like Assyria and doesn't want to offer them any hope or kindness, but he is called to do just that. He hopes God will destroy the people Jonah calls his enemy, but in the end, God embraces them!

The Moabites were another great enemy of Jesus' people, and yet in the Book of Ruth the hero of that story is none other than Ruth, the Moabite. She is even listed as one of Jesus' ancestors.

So there is a long tradition of religious people assuming their enemy is God's enemy, but eventually, the prophetic voices call us to reconsider such assumptions and they remind us that God is a loving Presence who does not ultimately exclude anyone for any reason.

We've seen Jesus operating in this great tradition throughout the Gospel of Matthew, haven't we? Zoroastrian astrologers from the ancient oppressor of Israel, Persia, come to visit him and to give him gifts. These "Magi" return to their homeland and their religion having, as the people they are, participated in the Christ event.

We see a Roman Centurion coming to Jesus for the healing of his servant. As a leader in the Roman military, we must assume that the Centurion was compliant with the norms and regulations of the empire and that would have included the practice of Emperor worship. This Roman pagan comes to Jesus and he isn't told to change his faith, he is praised for the faith he has! And his servant (which I believe was his same-gender lover), was healed.

But then we come to today's story and Jesus seems at first to be less welcoming, less inviting, less inclusive. Or is he merely demonstrating how needlessly hateful it is to demonize the Other? Perhaps he is offended that his disciples have not seen the sacred value of this woman and so he shows them how ugly their prejudice is...we often see in others what we cannot see in our selves.

And so the Canannite woman, a member of a group that Jesus' own bible condemns, comes to Jesus so that he might help her suffering child. Suffering is so opposed to the natural abundance that we expect from life, that the ancients assumed it was caused by evil spirits or demons, and so she says, "My daughter is possessed; please help her."

The disciples are not moved with compassion; they want her to leave. And so Jesus responds at first with the party line: "I'm here to gather up the lost sheep of Israel." In other words, my own people are suffering. We've been scattered by the Assyrians and the Babylonians and the Egyptians and the Persians and the Greeks and the Romans...I'm trying to unite my folks and get them to find hope and empowerment in their own lives.

The woman won't be brushed off, and I would like to think that if she had walked away discouraged that Jesus would have called after her and said, "Wait...I guess I could at least say a prayer for you." But she didn't walk away. Instead, she demanded, "Help me."

Jesus then uses an ethnic slur. Dogs, you see, eat scraps to survive. Some people in Jesus' community called Gentiles "dogs" because they didn't keep kosher...they ate foods that were considered unclean. Because they ate what Jesus' community would consider garbage, unclean food (like pork or shell fish), scraps basically, Jesus' community would call Gentiles "dogs." And so Jesus using the rude slur says, "It's not right to take the children's food and toss it to dogs." But the woman, who believes in herself even if Jesus and his friends do not, argues for her own needs. She says, "If I were a dog, you'd at least give me the leftovers from your table. How about treating me with at least as much compassion as you would a dog."

Jesus can't keep up the charade any longer. He says, "Of course, you're right! And not only are you a person of sacred value, you are a person of courage and great faith." And her daughter, the story says, was healed.

My guess is that some of Jesus' disciples experienced a healing, too. Perhaps one or two of them said, "Wow...is that how ugly we seem when we use the bible and religion as an excuse to exclude and demonize and ostracize people? And could it be that our religious prejudices are wrong, and that even people we thought were no good could be people of great faith, and are actually people who God loves as much as God loves us?"

In a dramatic way, this story agrees with what Matthew has been saying since page one. This story agrees with the prophet Isaiah saying that God's love is unfailing. This story agrees with the

spirit of that ancient text, the Didache, that prays for people to be brought together rather than kept apart. This story agrees that every person has sacred value and every person has access to the love and grace of God, because the loving Omnipresence that we call God would never and has never excluded anyone. This is the Good News. Amen.

© Durrell Watkins 2008

God's love surrounds me now.
God's love flows through me now.
God's love is expressing as me now.
God's love is blessing me now.
God's love is blessing all people now.
I expect and accept miracles.
And so it is.

Spiritual teacher Myrtle E. Cate wrote, "Know that you are encircled in Divine Love and Wisdom this moment – just where you are. There is nothing in the future for you to fear if you realize God's grace and power are sufficient for your every need."