

“Dogs”

24 February 2018

Little Trinity Anglican Church, Toronto

Discussion Questions

(take as many as you want, in any order)

Read Matthew 15.21-28

1. The story of the Canaanite woman, with Jesus’ hard – even insulting – words, is a challenging one for most modern readers. How did/does your interpretation of the story, whether long-standing or upon hearing it on Sunday, challenge/complicate/confirm/etc. your overall understanding of who Jesus is and what he is like?
2. The sermon suggests that one way of understanding what is happening in the story is that we are seeing Jesus, a first-century Jewish man, being “tempted” by the biases of his culture, which devalued non-Jews (Gentiles) and did not see God’s concern for them – just as Jesus was tempted by other human sins (see Hebrews 4.15). The Canaanite woman’s faith is thus a moment of learning, for Jesus, in which he sees a fuller sense of the mission to which God has called him. Does this interpretation make sense to you? What other ways might you read this passage (there are many!)?
3. As one possible way of exploring question #2, above, you might try to prayerfully imagine your way into the story. What’s the landscape? Where is this happening? How long does the episode last? What’s the volume/tone of voice in the words? What are the expressions on the faces? Explore the different ways your group’s members envision the scene. Do people’s different imaginative pictures lead to different interpretations?
4. For some of us, the idea of Jesus “learning” sounds heretical: wasn’t he God, and didn’t he know everything? Yet Scripture tells us that Jesus did “grow in wisdom” (Luke 2.52), and the sermon argues that his learning is key to his genuine humanity – that he’s not an alien, “God in a skin-suit”, simply *pretending* to be human. How do you react to the idea of Jesus learning? How does it affect your understanding of who he is? Of how he saves us?
5. The sermon observed that Jesus had a different conversation with the Canaanite woman, outside the borders of Israel, than he did with fellow Jews in similar need of healing, or even the Gentile living within Israel. From this, the sermon argued that her identity was spiritually significant, because it affected the shape of her faith – and, as sinners saved by grace through faith, that means our identities, in all our various aspects, are a spiritual concern. In particular, aspects of our earthly lives that make us secure or superior can be barriers to our sense of genuine, desperate need for Jesus, and a living trust in him (i.e., faith). How did you react to this idea? Were you comforted/offended/disturbed/provoked/etc.? Why? If the claim were true, what parts of yourself hinder deeper faith for you? What should you do about this?
6. The sermon noted that the Anglican “prayer of humble access” before receiving communion says “we are not worth so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table” – meaning, as sinners we are entitled to less than the dogs are. Yet by claiming the status of “sinner”, just as the Canaanite woman claimed the status of “dog”, we can claim the promises that God has made to sinners in his Word. Read together some of these promises (e.g. 1Tim 1.15, 1John 2.1-2, Ezek 18.23, along with any others that come to mind) and contemplate the magnitude of God’s grace.