

“Faith of a Dog”
Mark 7:24-37
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I was thinking the other day that in our married life, there was only a period of about three years in which Erin and I did not have at least one dog. That means that for almost 30 years we have had dogs in our house, most of the time more than one. Over the years, eight of those dogs have been female boxers. We love boxers and we've found female boxers to be a little bit calmer, less prone to running, and certainly smaller than their male counterparts. But then last year, for many reasons, we made the decision that we not only wanted to get another dog to go with the 3 year old female that we already have, but we decided for the first time to get a male dog. So Finn entered our lives. Finn is now just a year old and he is the apple of Erin's eye. She is over the moon in love with this dog and he with her. He's already bigger than our other dog, but he still thinks he's a puppy. He spends most of his day with Erin, of course while I'm at work, but when I come home he can barely contain his excitement. One of the reasons is that his second favorite thing to do is to sit in my lap when I'm in an easy chair. He doesn't quite realize that a sixty pound dog is not the most comfortable dog to have napping in your lap. But he loves it. Almost as much as he love his favorite thing. After he greets me each day that I come home, he runs over to the cabinet in the family room and he will stare at it. Because that's where we keep his favorite toy. It's a purple spiky plastic ball. It used to squeak, but that didn't last long with a boxer chewing on it. But he loves it, he loves to chase it, even to throw it to himself. But what he loves most is to bring it to me and get me to play tug-of-war with him. He can do that for hours, and I do not exaggerate. He'll hold on to that ball for all he's worth. I run out of steam long before Finn does. He will go and go. That dog is nothing if not persistent.

Faith should be persistent like that. In today's story the Syro-Phoenician woman had everything going against her when she pushed her way up to the front of the crowd to see Jesus. First she was a woman. I hope we are getting to the point in our culture if not yet in our world, where such a thing is

unremarkable. But in Jesus' day, a religious leader would not speak to a woman. It simply wasn't done. It is important for us to note that given the restrictions of his society, Jesus did an amazing amount for women. He spoke to them, healed them, treated them as equals, there were even women among his followers. In the first century church there are many examples of women in leadership positions: Priscilla, Lydia, Junia, maybe even Mary Magdalene. It's taking us a while, but we may be getting to the position where women in leadership positions is unremarkable. But this woman who came with a request to Jesus was not only female but she was Gentile. This was a second strike against her. She was not Jewish—she had no right to engage this Jewish leader in conversation.

But this woman does approach Jesus despite all the prohibitions of society. Because she has something that is more important than any of those. He has a daughter who is sick. Like any parent, she is desperately afraid for her daughter's life. She bows before Jesus and begs him to cast the demon out of her daughter. We expect our kind, loving Jesus to say, “Of course I will save your daughter,” but here Jesus is caught with his proverbial compassion down. He says to her, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.” Jesus is telling this desperate woman that his mission is for the Jews and the Jews alone. He calls her a dog. Some commentaries have suggested that the word “dog” is not as harsh as it sounds, that Jesus is merely referring to her as a pet. No. The world is “dog” and dog is what he means.¹

So what does she do now? She's persistent. I think that for most of us if we had been referred to as a dog, we would have crept away or walked away in a huff, but not his woman. She turns it back on Jesus and says, “Sir, even the dogs get the crumbs that fall from the children's table.” Maybe Jesus is reflecting the traditional Jewish prejudice against Gentiles and against women, or maybe he is trying to teach his disciples a lesson about God's inclusiveness, but immediately both of them know that God's love goes beyond any human barrier. Her persistence exposes the barrier breaking love of God, and her daughter is healed.

¹ Howe, Amy. *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 4*. p. 44-6

If we are to take anything from this story as a lesson to us, I hope it is her persistence. She doesn't walk away, she keeps pestering Jesus, she keeps asking. I hope we are as persistent. Faith should be persistent. We should keep going even when we encounter difficulty. We should keep believing even when the world tells us it's crazy. Our faith should be persistent. We should be persistent in prayer just as the woman was. Do we ever stop praying for those we love? Do we ever stop praying for our church, for God's people? Do we ever stop praying for our nation, for peace in the world, for justice to roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream? Do we keep praying until the world changes or until we ourselves are changed? We only stop praying when we've given up, when we have lost faith. Faith is persistent. We should be persistent in our worship. The friends of the deaf man brought him to Jesus, they kept coming through the crowd in order to be with Jesus. We should keep coming. Faith is persistent in worship. Do we stop coming because we didn't get much out of worship today? Do we stop coming because we haven't sung our favorite hymn in at least a year? Do we stop coming because the sermon was boring and I'm sure I've heard this message before? Or do we take seriously the prophet's admonition to do justice and love kindness and to walk humbly with God and we realize that part of walking humbly with God is showing up here with God's people and confess our sins, and share the peace, and hear the word and give him praise? Faith is persistent in prayer and in worship. Faith keeps showing up.

Our faith is persistent because we have come to know that God's love is more than persistent, it is never ending. God never ever gives up on us. No matter the condition of our faith, of our lives, God's love keeps after us, and that means all of us. New Testament scholar Mitzi Minor writes that Mark gives us God's initiatives in these stories. Jesus' actions show that a "worthless Gentile girl whose mind was devoured by a demon and a good for nothing deaf man who couldn't even speak clearly were indeed children of God to be embraced and valued. There are not external barriers between God and any human being: not race, class, ethnicity, gender, age or physical condition. Consequently, there should

also be no such barriers between human beings.”²

Amy Howe writes, “there are no walls made of withered hands, deaf ears, or troubled minds separating us from God or from each other. Status is a product of our own imaginations, invisible to God. Once we acknowledge that there are no walls separating us, love and mercy flow unfettered, and all people are deemed equally valuable.”³ All of us. From the oldest who has trouble hearing the words when you say “Peace be with you,” to the youngest who spends the sermon coloring in her bulletin, but both of whom are with us in worship and in prayer. And we keep doing it. We keep going. We keep on this journey together. We are learning to be persistent in our faith, because God is persistent in his love.

2 Minor, Mitzi. *The Spirituality of Mark*. p. 51.

3 Howe, p. 46.