

“THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO DOGS (#1):
WOOF! GOES THE CHRISTIAN”
 (2 Corinthians 5:17; Matthew 15:21-28)
 © 2023 Rev. Dr. Brian E. Germano

[PROPS NEEDED: PPT slides of (#1) Rembrandt drawing of Canaanite women before Jesus; and (#2) Brian & Buster pic/dog on back, paws up

[Cornerstone U.M.C.; 6-25-23]

--I--

1. [11am ONLY... Read Text: 2 Corinthians 5:17; Matthew 15:21-28 and Pray.]

2. [ASK SERIES OF QUESTIONS...]
 - A--How many of you own a dog as a pet right now (raise your hand and keep it raised)?
 - B--If you didn't raise your hand, how many of you grew up in a home with a pet dog?
 - C--How many of you who still haven't raised your hand have ever lived in a neighborhood or on a road where you had neighbors who owned dogs?
 - D--And just so we don't leave anyone out, how many of the rest of you have ever *seen* a dog?

3. You know, for thousands of years, *canis familiaris* (the scientific name for the domesticated dog), has been an integral part of human family and society.
 - A--Today, over 800 classified breeds are found in every part of the inhabited world. ¹
 - B--But perhaps more important than this is the fact that dogs (for the most part) are generally cute, each breed uniquely attractive to different types of people. (*Have you ever notice how remarkable that some dogs even look like their owners!*)
 - C--They're also affectionate, loyal, forgiving, fun to play with, & generally just good company.
 - D--And over the years, dogs have come to be called “*mans' [and womans'] best friend*,” and its an appellation that they've generally lived-up to very well.

4. For these reasons, during what we call the “*dog-days*” of summer (the hottest part of the year), through a short series called The Gospel According to Dogs, I want to offer a light-hearted (yet genuine) exploration of a few lessons I believe we can learn about our Christian faith from our four-legged friends. ²
 - A--Now, no offense to any of you cat-lovers, or fish (or iguana)-owners out there -- I'm not trying to exclude you, or say that there aren't lessons to be learned from *your* pet, or say that we all need to own a *dog*.
 - B--But during these four weeks (except next week/Patriotic Sunday), I'll simply be using *dogs* as models for how we can live better lives as humans, and focusing on what they can *teach* us about Christian faith.

C--Now, some of you may be thinking that this is a bit of a “stretch” (no pun intended!) --that it's absurd (or even irreverent) to use common dogs in church as a teaching tool!

--II--

5. But I believe that today's two scriptures give us “paws/pause” to reconsider that assumption.

A--[9am ONLY... Let me read both of them to you...

1--In 2 Cor. 5:17, Paul says, *"So then, if anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the new creation. The old things have gone away, & look, new things have arrived!"*

2--And Matthew 15:21-28, *"21 From there, Jesus went to the regions of Tyre and Sidon. 22 A Canaanite woman from those territories came out and shouted, 'Show me mercy, Son of David. My daughter is suffering terribly from demon possession.' 23 But he didn't respond to her at all. His disciples came and urged him, 'Send her away; she keeps shouting out after us.' 24 Jesus replied, 'I've been sent only to the lost sheep, the people of Israel.' 25 But she knelt before him and said, 'Lord, help me.' 26 He replied, 'It is not good to take the children's bread and toss it to dogs.' 27 She said, 'Yes, Lord. But even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall off their masters' table.' 28 Jesus answered, 'Woman, you have great faith. It will be just as you wish.' And right then her daughter was healed."*

A--[11am ONLY... To begin with, remember that in the first reading, 2 Corinthians 5:17 says that *"If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"*

B--[BOTH services...] Now in the Greek translation, the verse from 2 Corinthians 5 literally reads, *"If anyone is in Christ, they are a new creature..."*-- not just a new “creation,” but a new living being (“creature”).³

C--So this begs the question, then: ...what *kind* of “new creature” are we? ...what *kind* of “living being” are we to be most like?

D--Well, strange as it may sound, during this series I want to suggest that the “new creature” that comes closest to illustrating what we're to be like as a Christian is... (you guessed it) a DOG (hence today's sermon title, *"Woof! Goes the Christian!"*)

E--Now, lest some of you think that your pastor had *far too long* a vacation, let me explain what I mean by inviting us to explore together today's second scripture from Matthew 15.

6. Here we have the story of Jesus on a journey being visited by (wait for it)... a “Canine-ite / Canaanite” woman seeking healing for her demon-tormented daughter.

A--The story tells us that she is constantly “*dogging*” the steps of Jesus and his disciples (so to speak), making a complete nuisance of herself, so much so that the disciples plead with Jesus to “*send her away*” so they’ she’ll quit bugging them (Vs. 23).

B--But Vs. 25 tells us that instead, “*She came & knelt before him saying, 'Lord, help me.'*”

1--Now, the Greek word for “*knelt*” (*proskuneo*) literally means “*to kiss like a dog licking its master’s hand; to fawn or crouch towards; to... prostrate oneself in homage, reverence, adoration, and worship.*” ⁴

2--On the screen you’ll see a drawing by Rembrandt of this scene, depicting this woman’s “dog-like” prostration quite clearly [**SHOW REMBRANDT SLIDE**].

3--Now we’ve got to remember that in Jesus’ time, *women* had very little status in Hebrew culture.

4--But what’s more is that *this* was a *Canaanite* woman--& the Canannites were *not* even Jews, but detested Gentile foreigners (“*dogs*” as some called them). ⁵

C--So by the customs of the day, Jesus’ refusal to help is understandable. Yet, that makes this woman’s boldness and persistence in Verses 26-27 all the more remarkable:

1--There, after Jesus initially refuses her saying “*It’s not fair to take the children’s food* (meaning his ministry to the Jewish people) *and throw it to the dogs* (meaning Gentile women such as her),”... she replies, “*Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.*”

2--This humble, sincere, yet bold faith was obviously the *very kind* of faith that Jesus was looking for among the people of *Israel*, for immediately he commended her for that faith, and then healed her daughter. ⁶

7. In other words, it was precisely this woman’s humility -- her willingness to become *nothing* so that Christ in her could become *something* -- that makes her story remarkable.

A--She was willing to do what most of us find very *difficult* to do: ...to surrender herself and become totally obedient to Jesus, her Master.

1--In the words of one author, “*She was [now] no longer a Canaanite [woman]... She was a new creature, ...a disciple of Jesus -- she was now a DOG.*” ⁷

2--[**SHOW SLIDES of "Brian & Buster"** (dog on back, paws up)..] Most of us probably know that a dog on its back, paws up in the air (like this picture of me and my Grand-dog "Buster") is a sign of surrender -- the dog wants its belly rubbed, and this posture is his/her way of saying, “*I humbly submit and surrender myself to you to do that!*”

B--The point here, you see, is that like our canine friends in this posture, and like the Canaanite woman in today's story, to be a follower of Jesus means to have a willingness to humble & surrender ourselves totally & completely in obedience to Christ. ⁸

--III--

8. You see, to be a "*new creature in Christ*" (as today's 2 Corinthians scripture says) means, among other things, that we are to take on some of the qualities and characteristics of our canine friends -- ...

A--...That ALL Christians are called to be "dogs," at least in the sense that **humility** with one another and **obedience** to Christ are to be our trademarks -- and that where one or either is lacking, we'll find *INauthentic* faith.

B--And according to these passages, genuine, *authentic* Christianity involves not only humility and obedience, but sacrifice and surrender of self for the sake of Christ.

9. So as we wrap up, let me simply ask: What are YOU willing to give up or surrender in order to truly follow Jesus?

A--...Money? ...success? ...popularity? ...personal time? ...a need to have things done *your* way? ...your nice car or house?

B--Is it ...a bad habit? ...or perhaps even a *good* habit that's gotten in the way of the things of God in your life?

C--Whatever it is, if you and I will be willing to humble and surrender ourselves to Christ as this woman did, then I believe we'll also experience the wonders that she did

D--In a manner of speaking, then, according to these scriptures, "*Woof! Goes the Christian*" -- we are ALL called to be "dogs for Christ." ⁹ So, how well does YOUR "dog-life" match your "bark"?

10. Today, I want to end in an unusual way today: ...I want to first invite anyone who wants to call out the name of your dog (or a pet dog that you know, or have known) -- ONLINE AUDIENCE PLEASE TYPE YOUR DOG NAME IN THE "CHAT" -- and after we're finished I'll pray for us ... [WAIT AS DOG NAMES ARE CALLED OUT...].

11. [PRAYER: *Lord, whether we have a dog of our own or not, today we've been reminded of some of the values and qualities of Christian faith that they can teach us: ...**humility** with one other; and **obedience and surrender** to you. They are qualities that we know are needed in our relationship with you. But they're also qualities that we need YOUR help in practicing. So this week, O God, help us to learn from all your creatures how to better practice these characteristics of faith. If we called out a dog's name, help us to take a few moments to prayerfully watch and play with our canine friend, asking you for better insight into our lives as we do this. If we didn't have a name to call out, help us to*

be mindful around us of all animals of your creation, and how they can teach us to become more humble and obedient in our everyday living. And no matter who we are, O Lord, teach us, like the Canaanite woman, the great value of becoming a true “canine” for you. In the name of Jesus we pray, Amen.”]

12. [CLOSING 11am HYMN: UMHymnal #467, “Trust and Obey”]

ENDNOTES:

¹ The earliest evidence of humans and dogs living in a domesticated partnership is the 14,200 year-old grave of a human and a dog known as the “Bonn-Oberkassel dog” (See the online Wikipedia article “*Domestication of the Dog*” at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Domestication_of_the_dog)

² This sermon series was inspired by -- and some of its overall themes generally taken from -- Robert L. Short’s book The Gospel According to Dogs: What Our Four-Legged Saints Can Teach Us (San Francisco: Harper Collins Books, 2007).

³ The Greek word is *ktisis* -- “an original formation; a building, creation, creature, ordinance” (Strong’s Greek Dictionary, Word #G2937).

⁴ Strong’s Greek Dictionary, Word #G4352.

⁵ This observation led author Robert Short to sum the situation up in this way: “*This [Canaanite] dog of a woman... was quite willing to play this part; to become a dog, literally down on all fours... begging. Not only a Canaanite and a woman, but now also a dog! How low can a person sink?*” (Robert L. Short, The Gospel According to Dogs, p. 10).

⁶ Commenting on this response, Robert Short says, “*This was nothing new in the ministry of Jesus. From the very beginning he’d been consistent and insistent that his message was directed to the spiritually poor, to the lowest of the low in heart, to emotional down-and-outers, to those knocked down on all fours, to those who were willing to crawl B to the dogs, in other words. And here she came, taking Jesus at his word, groveling and grateful for any little scrap that might fall from his table. She became a dog. And this was exactly the kind of humility Jesus was looking for*” (Robert Short, The Gospel According to Dogs, p. 12).

⁷ (Emphasis Mine), Robert Short, The Gospel According to Dogs, pp. 12-13.

⁸ As Robert Short puts it, “*Christians and dogs must all go to the same school... [-- an] 'obedience school' opened by Christ...*” (Robert Short, The Gospel According to Dogs, p. 24). He goes on to identify what kind of obedience he means: “*Dogs and Christians share in the 'obedience of love.'... Christians and canines know that love is something we... do, regardless of how we may feel. Love -- Christian love -- is something we do or it isn't really Christian love*” (Short, p. 26). “*Whether we are emotionally stretched out to the breaking point or we metaphorically fall on all fours, as the Canaanite woman did, this infinitely low point of suffering is the necessary first step in becoming a real Christian. This is first reason all real Christians are dogs. At the beginning of our journey, each one of us was knocked down to this doglike level of lowliness. [And] it's precisely from this lowest of low points that Christ... raise[s] us up. It [is] at rock bottom that we finally [find] the rock-firm foundation that we need. [And] it's only out of these depths that real faith can be born -- to humbly follow and cry after Jesus as 'Lord!'*” (Short, p. 14).

⁹ In Christian history, in fact, dogs became a traditional symbol for Christian faith because of their watchfulness and fidelity. The Dominican monastic order of Roman Catholicism even adopted a black and white dog as their symbol -- their name even comes from this concept: “*Domini canes*” = “*dogs of the Lord.*” (Short, p. 13).