

## “Cats & Dogs”

The Rev. Drew Willard  
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James 2:1-17, Mark 7:24-37

Let us pray... O God,  
Help us to be more loving – even when others are less than loving towards us.  
May we be willing to face our own ignorance and be ready to learn and change.  
May we be steadfast in bridging gaps of misunderstanding.

Amen

“Fighting like cats and dogs” –

This is a figure of speech that is fairly common to use  
to describe situations, like when siblings don't get along.

It is not unusual to describe people's *behaviors*  
with comparisons to animals' behaviors in this way.

It is rare to actually call someone some kind of an animal –  
and when this is done, it is usually derogatory.

However, sports teams take pride in such animal names for their mascots  
such as the 'Bears', the 'Buffalos', the 'Raptors',  
but generally not as personal references.

I suppose there are exceptions, like to be personally called a 'lion', or an 'eagle',  
or even a 'gazelle', or maybe a 'workhorse' as a good thing.

However more often than not,  
to be compared with an animal is not complimentary,  
yet even Jesus referred to some of his opponents  
as 'wolves in sheep's clothing', 'swine' – and even 'dogs'.

Today's Gospel lesson touches on the ethnic tensions and ancient rivalries  
of 1<sup>st</sup> Century CE Palestine, simmering for 150 years  
since the Jewish Maccabees defeated their brutal Greek overlords,  
and even earlier since the Hebrews of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century BCE  
conquered the Canaanites to claim their 'Promised Land'.

The Greeks of Syro-Phoenicia under Antiochus IV had been particularly  
cruel as they tried to wipe out Jewish culture  
by outlawing their religious practices,  
desecrating their Temple of Jerusalem, and viciously torturing rebels.

Such tribal resentments, prejudice, and hatred serve as the toxic ingredients  
for violence... more often than not, against the innocent,  
like what happened on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 in America, and is  
continuing in the Middle East & many other places throughout the world.  
The problem of prejudice frequently appears in Bible stories,  
as well as insights for how to deal with it – like today's Gospel lesson...

Willard, p. 2

What did you hear? What did you hear differently?

Do you agree? What do you suggest?

The problem of prejudice and ethnic hatred is the background for what happens in Mark 7:24-37 and suggests why Jesus responded the way he did to the Syro-Phoenician woman.

The lectionary assigned readings for today combine this story with the healing of a deaf and dumb person, and this is significant.

Seminary professor, The Rev. Dr. Phil Ruge-Jones, says there are several ways to interpret Jesus' encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman.

Was he setting up the disciples to teach them a lesson about their prejudices?

Was he setting up the woman to test her faith?

Was he the one being tested – and in the process serve as an example to us?

When the woman spoke right back – even using the epithet he called her, Jesus changed his tone and assured this woman that her daughter was freed from the evil spirit.

What happens next seems to support this interpretation:

that it was Jesus who changed his attitude of prejudice

and became more open to non-Jewish foreigners or Gentiles.

He was still in Gentile territory when he healed a person who was deaf & dumb by literally opening this person's ears and making him able to speak.

Furthermore, this serves to illustrate how changing an internal attitude to be more *open* to listen and hear,

must be demonstrated by our words as well as deeds.

This is reinforced by the story that comes next in the Gospel of Mark which is the Feeding of the 4000 – still in the land of the Gentiles.

so that Jesus' mission was expanding to people

beyond the traditional land of the children of Israel.

A further connection is with the Biblical story we heard last Sunday where Jesus taught that eating certain foods

does not make someone ritually 'unclean',

but that God is more concerned about the words & deeds

that come out from someone's heart.

In a conversation with our office manager Penny Timson,

she made the observation that this unnamed woman –

who confronted Jesus with his own tribalism,

was therefore responsible for helping to bring Christianity out

to the wider world as Jesus began to open up

his ministry to the Gentiles.

Willard, p.3

Our lesson from James affirms this wider view of being open to people who are different from our tribe, as it is written in James 2:1...

*My friends, if you have faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ,  
you won't treat some people better than others.*

Also in James 2:8...

*You will do all right,  
if you obey the most important law in the Scriptures.  
It is the law that commands us to love others  
as much as we love ourselves.*

The lesson from James 2:1-17 warns us that if we aren't loving towards others, we will fall into the trap of prejudice, scapegoating, and aggression.

There are three parts to this text where James – who is called James the Just, addresses his hearers as “My friends...”

<sup>1</sup> My friends, if you have faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ,  
you won't treat some people better than others.

<sup>5</sup> My dear friends, pay attention.

<sup>8</sup> You will do all right, if you obey...  
the law that commands us to love others  
as much as we love ourselves. ...

<sup>9</sup> But if you treat some people better than others,  
you have done wrong...

But even in judgment, God is merciful!

<sup>14</sup> My friends,

<sup>17</sup> Faith that doesn't lead us to do good deeds is all alone and dead!  
or “Faith without works is dead”  
and faith that does work is loving-kindness in action.

This is how we overcome the evil spirits  
of fear, deception, and hatred.

This is how we disrupt the age-old festering  
of prejudice, racism, and violence – beginning with our own attitudes.

Love your enemies.

Get to know them and transform them – if you can, into friends.

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

Forgive their sins as you desire to be forgiven of your sins.

Don't expect perfection in yourself or others,

but work to per-fect yourself by practicing God's perfect way  
of loving-kindness.

Amen

*Our lesson today from James 2:1-17 speaks specifically to the responsibility we Christians have to care for impoverished people, and that 'faith without works is dead'...*

[James the Just said,]

<sup>1</sup> My friends, if you have faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, you won't treat some people better than others.

<sup>2</sup> Suppose a rich person wearing fancy clothes and a gold ring comes to one of your meetings.

And suppose a poor person dressed in worn-out clothes also comes.

<sup>3</sup> You must not give the best seat to the one in fancy clothes and tell the one who is poor to stand at the side or sit on the floor.

<sup>4</sup> That is the same as saying that some people are better than others, and you would be acting like a crooked judge.

<sup>5</sup> My dear friends, pay attention.

God has given a lot of faith to the poor people in this world.

[God] has also promised them a share in his kingdom that he will give to everyone who loves him.

<sup>6</sup> You mistreat the poor.

But isn't it the rich who boss you around and drag you off to court?

<sup>7</sup> Aren't they the ones who make fun of your Lord?

<sup>8</sup> You will do all right, if you obey the most important law in the Scriptures.

It is the law that commands us to love others as much as we love ourselves.

<sup>9</sup> But if you treat some people better than others, you have done wrong, and the Scriptures teach that you have sinned.

<sup>10</sup> If you obey every law except one, you are still guilty of breaking them all.

<sup>11</sup> The same God who told us to be faithful in marriage also told us not to murder.

So even if you are faithful in marriage, but murder someone, you still have broken God's Law.

<sup>12</sup> Speak and act like people who will be judged by the law that sets us free.

<sup>13</sup> Do this, because on the day of judgment there will be no pity for those who have not had pity on others.

But even in judgment, God is merciful!

<sup>14</sup> My friends, what good is it to say you have faith, when you don't do anything to show that you really do have faith?

Can that kind of faith save you?

<sup>15</sup> If you know someone who doesn't have any clothes or food,

<sup>16</sup> you shouldn't just say, "I hope all goes well for you.

I hope you will be warm and have plenty to eat."

What good is it to say this, unless you do something to help?

<sup>17</sup> Faith that doesn't lead us to do good deeds is all alone and dead!

*Let us be challenged and guided by these words...*

Mark 7:24-37 [CEV]

<sup>24</sup> Jesus left and went to the region near the city of Tyre,  
where he stayed in someone's home.

He did not want people to know he was there,  
but they found out anyway.

<sup>25</sup> A woman whose daughter had an evil spirit in her heard where Jesus was.  
And right away she came and knelt down at his feet.

<sup>26</sup> The woman was Greek and had been born in the part of Syria  
known as Phoenicia.

She begged Jesus to force the demon out of her daughter.

<sup>27</sup> But Jesus said,

“The children must first be fed!

It isn't right to take away their food and feed it to dogs.”<sup>[a]</sup>

<sup>28</sup> The woman replied,

“Lord, even dogs eat the crumbs that children drop from the table.”

<sup>29</sup> Jesus answered,

“That's true!

You may go now. The demon has left your daughter.”

<sup>30</sup> When the woman got back home, she found her child lying on the bed.  
The demon had gone.

<sup>31</sup> Jesus left the region around Tyre  
and went by way of Sidon toward Lake Galilee.

He went through the land near the ten cities known as Decapolis.

<sup>32</sup> Some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk.

They begged Jesus just to touch him.

<sup>33</sup> After Jesus had taken him aside from the crowd,  
he stuck his fingers in the man's ears.

Then he spit and put it on the man's tongue.

<sup>34</sup> Jesus looked up toward heaven, and with a groan he said,

“Effatha!” which means “Open up!”

<sup>35</sup> At once the man could hear,

and he had no more trouble talking clearly.

<sup>36</sup> Jesus told the people not to say anything about what he had done.

But the more he told them, the more they talked about it.

<sup>37</sup> They were completely amazed and said,

“Everything he does is good!

He even heals people who cannot hear or talk.”