

Dogs at the Lord's Table: *Mark 7:1-9; 14-30*

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Chris, our church administrative assistant, and I wrestled this week with what image to put on the front of your bulletin today. Often we try to choose an image that goes with the sermon text or the theme of the Sunday, but when your text is one like this one: one that talks about dirty hands, and eating dirty food, and what happens to the food you eat--that it goes out of the body and into the sewer--and then, on top of all that, ends with a story of Jesus calling a desperate woman a dog...what kind of image would you have chosen?

So, we settled on a cute dog, climbing on a dinner table because, why not? Right? Who couldn't love that picture?! It's a good distraction from our text this morning, a text that shows up in every list entitled, "The Hard Sayings of Jesus."

Maybe you gasped a few times while Don and Marti were reading the scripture to us. Here Jesus is, in Gentile territory, but the Jewish Leaders have followed him to keep an eye on him. They've seen what he does at home, among the Jews, and are not happy. What heretical things will he do in Gentile territory?

Their fears are rewarded, for immediately, they see the disciples eating Gentile food with unwashed hands. It's not a big deal to us, but to them, it's huge. Their concern is not bacteria. This is 1600 years before the first bacteria would ever be discovered. Their concern is who is clean and who is unclean.

Their world was divided into two groups: clean and unclean. Clean meant that you could approach God. Unclean meant you had to remain distant from God. And uncleanliness was contagious. You could catch it and transmit it by touch. By eating with unwashed hands, Jesus' disciples became as unclean as the Gentiles. And the Pharisees catch them in the act.

But what is Jesus' response: "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites", he says. He starts quoting scripture and preaching.

"This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines."

"You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."

"You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition!"

"Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile."

"Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?"

"It is what comes out of a person that defiles."

You can imagine the response this sermon got. Not a lot of handshaking and compliments in the Fellowship Hall afterwards. The Pharisees heard it as a threat to their whole religious system of keeping the Children of Israel clean before God.

But someone in the congregation heard Jesus' sermon, not as a threat but as hope.

We don't know her name, only that she was a Gentile and desperate because her daughter had a demon. Certainly she heard of Jesus casting out the demons from that man in the graveyard Jesus healed on his last trip to this area. Perhaps Jesus could do that for her daughter. So, she got creative.

But who was she to demand anything of Jesus? Yet, that is what she does, breaking all religious and social conventions in the process.

She interrupted Jesus, a Gentile woman entering the house while a Jewish Rabbi is resting. This is scandalous. And when Jesus hears her request, he responds with what has been described as his most un-Christlike statement ever: "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

But she doesn't let this turn her away. She argues with Jesus, and creatively and boldly responds: "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

Then Jesus said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter."

Maybe it's time we look back at that cute puppy picture on the front of the bulletin. What is going on here? I have a lot of question. The story ends well. Her daughter is healed in one of Jesus' most amazing miracles, yet, where he heals her from miles away. But what of this conversation? Where is Jesus' grace?

Usually, when Jesus heals someone in the gospel of Mark, Jesus will say, "Because of your faith, you are healed." But here, Jesus says, "Because of what you just said." Is he saying that she was healed because she made a good argument?

"Dogs" was a common name for Gentiles, for they were unclean like the dogs of their day, not housepets, but mongrels living on the street, scavenging trash, eating dead animals. Is Jesus promoting this racist stereotype, but then changing his mind because of the woman's statement?

Maybe he's playing "devil's advocate". Adopting the persona of the culture he comes from, being intentionally provocative to show them how messed up this system of clean and unclean really is, and that in God's new kingdom, all are equal.

I'll let you come to your own conclusions as to what Jesus might be up to. But what I'm most intrigued by is that, in spite of it all, in spite of the messed up culture, and the social norms, and Jesus' response which, no matter his reasoning, still must've initially come off as cruel and harsh to this woman, she does not back down. She could've gotten angry or scared. But instead, she gets creative.

This week, I listened to a recent episode of the Public Radio show *On Being*. The host, Krista Tippett was interviewing the author Elizabeth Gilbert, who wrote the big best-seller from a few years ago, *Eat, Pray, Love*. Gilbert's current work is on creativity, and she said that often, we think that being creative is about tapping into our passions or about giftedness, that is, some people are just born more creative than others.

Gilbert says we have it all wrong. Being creative is really nothing more than looking at the world and choosing curiosity over fear. Curiosity over fear.

Isn't that what this story is, ultimately, about. The Pharisees obsession with upholding the "tradition of the elders" is based on fear. Fear of change. Fear of contamination. Fear of displeasing God. Fear of the other.

But this woman: she understands God's extravagant love, that no one--not even the dogs--go unfed. And so she pushes against the tradition, argues with "the way we've always done it". Her curiosity takes over and she overcomes fear, and pushing in where she doesn't belong, and the whole world opens up. Through her creativity, shows us better way.

We need more creativity in our world.

Last week, Dallas Area Interfaith, an organization I used to work for, organized an interfaith prayer vigil in the wake of the horrible events that happened in that city. They gathered together religious and community leaders of multiple faiths and races, along with members of the Dallas police, to build trust and pray for a hopeful way forward. But they're not just going to pray. For a decade, they've been working with the police, finding public money to hire more officers so that they could have an effective community policing strategy based on trust, not fear. And the work will continue.

Together, they're choosing curiosity over fear, as they work toward a creative future.

In a suburb of Louisville, Kentucky, as the area faced an influx of refugees and a growing fear as the community became more diverse, members of Beargrass Christian Church decided to not give into the fear, and instead get to know the refugees. They learned through conversations that many of the refugees had no transportation to get to the store or to work, because they had no driver's licenses. So the church got creative. Many of their church members were enthusiastic cyclists, so they hatched a plan. They started

with 10 donated bikes from church members, and gave those out. To date, they have now given out 1,500 bikes.

“I don’t have a car, I don’t have anything,” said Zade Al-Fadhli, a refugee from Iraq. “I’m waiting for my license. Just because of that I have to use a bike to go to the market. I need this very much.” They choose creativity over fear, and God’s love is being made known.

In Nashville, Tennessee, New Covenant Christian Church had an idea. They had been a part of helping those in need in the community for years, but decided more should be done. Now they host an annual block party that rivals any city festival. With music, dancing, games, good food and, what the church calls--lots of crazy love.

At the festival, they also give out backpacks to kids, free clothing, free haircuts. They have legal clinics, and medical and dental help. They connect people to social service agencies. And the goal is that people will experience joy and encounter God’s extravagant, crazy love.

Creativity, over fear.

I heard a preacher once explain the Holy Spirit, and she said that really, the Spirit was God’s creativity, let loose in the world. I like that.

So, what’s your story? What’s our story? How is God’s creative spirit moving among us, to overcome fear and “the way things always have been” in our church and in our community? How is God’s spirit calling us to get creative in showing God’s extravagant love to all people.

Fear causes us to close up--our minds and our hearts. But creativity opens us up, so that we can imagine a new world. A world where fear and injustice and the way we’ve always done things are interrupted by a creative outpouring of God’s love, and all God’s children--dogs or not--can sit at the Lord’s great table of grace.

May we always tap into that creative spirit of God, as we open our hearts, our minds, our churches, our communities and our world to God’s crazy love. Amen.