

Dogs Under the Table
St. Mary's and Holy Trinity
September 8th, 2024

Lord, may only the truth be spoken and only the truth heard. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Hi! I'm the guy that new name on the church sign belongs so. You can call me Rev. Tom or just Tom. My wife Tania and I live in east Ottawa. Tania is from Niagara originally. I'm from rural Alberta, somewhere north of Calgary where it's all canola, cows, and pick-up trucks.

Tania and I met when I moved from Alberta to Toronto to study theology. We got married at the height of COVID. Decided either Calgary or Ottawa were the cities we could agree on, and we now live in Ottawa. I am a PhD student in theological studies. So, during the past two years, I did half time ministry, half time thesis writing - which nearly killed me. But I was given the past five months away from ministry to finish up my thesis. And... somehow...while I had my head down writing...the ground moved under my feet and now I'm suddenly talking to all of you!

It's good though. I'm a country kid. Small church community makes the most sense to me. And so far, I'm super enjoying the people here. In case you are not aware, I'll be serving your parish as well as _____ over in _____. Which means...

In the weeks to come, I'll try to use my sermons to help you get to know me. But now I want to talk about the gospel reading from Mark, because centering Jesus is what I'm all about. And I want us to learn something from the Syrophonecian woman. She gets something absolutely key to having a relationship with God through Christ. *She takes herself lightly*. There's no thicker barrier between us and God than our own pride. Because the Syrophonecian woman doesn't take herself too seriously, she has a surprising moment of connection with Jesus.

So. Picture the story. After challenging the religious leaders, Jesus and the disciples get out of dodge. They head outside their Jewish borders. They go to Tyre, a bustling port city. Jesus doesn't want anyone to know he is there. They're hiding out, taking a breather, avoiding controversy.

Now, interestingly enough, the Gentile people of Tyre and Jesus' Jewish people go way back. They're neighbours. For generations, the people of Tyre and the Jews have been rivals, with their different gods and different cultures. And they may have been known, from time to time, to call each other names. The New Testament historian, N.T. Wright, says, "Jews often thought of Gentiles as 'dogs,' and what Gentiles said about Jews was usually just as uncomplimentary" (95). But there is this wonderfully bold and desperate woman of Tyre. Her daughter is oppressed by a demon. She believes Jesus can help, and he can. But Jesus is in a

tight situation. And in order to understand the tight situation, we need to understand the difference between Jesus and a genie.

We often mistake Jesus for a really, really nice genie, who will grant us wishes if we pray to him. But with a genie, one gets their three wishes, and then one's relationship with the genie is over. With Jesus, though, his purpose is far deeper than to grant us wishes, even when those wishes are deadly serious.

We have to see the big picture. Jesus is God himself become human flesh. He does this to reconcile humanity to God. Jesus takes our fragile human nature, which is lost or ill with sin and suffering, and he fills human nature with God. He is God and human in one person. And the Holy Spirit joins us to his person so that our humanity is joined to God and filled with God. That's what Jesus is up to. He comes *join* people to God. He comes to retie the broken knot between us and our loving Creator.

Why, then, does Jesus act exclusively toward this gentile woman? Well, God called the ancient Israelites – specifically them – to be a people to show all other peoples the need for the that knot to be retied. So, in Jesus' ministry, he was focussed solely on showing signs to his people, signs that their long-awaited dream was coming true. Jesus' people deserved to have their moment. *The disciples* would be the ones to bring the retied knot between humanity and God to the rest of humanity.

But the Syrophenician woman begs for a miracle. Well, we have to understand, miracles for the first-century Jews were signs of the great reconciliation happening. It wasn't time yet to do that among the Gentiles. But this woman insists. And Jesus' answer is this surprising moment of more playful banter than insult. I picture Jesus tapping her on the shoulder and playing up the rivalry of their cultures. "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." And if she took herself too seriously, she would have been insulted. But instead, it seems like she gets the joke, takes herself lightly, and pleads at her own expense. "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Jesus heals her daughter.

What we see here is a sweet, unexpected moment of connection between one woman and Jesus. She's desperate. She comes to Jesus to grant a wish. But, beyond that, she gets a moment of connection. Light-hearted banter. He grants her wish, but what's more important, she gets a small taste of reconciliation with God through Christ. A little string of the retied knot was given to her.

The difference between Jesus and a genie is that sometimes – as you well know - he doesn't grant our wish but still invites us to have a moment of connection with him. Sometimes our trials are just what we need to draw closer to Jesus, and through him, become more reconciled to God. What easily gets in the way of that is our own pride. Sure, we can get offended and angry and become even more alienated from God. Or we can be like the Syrophenician woman.

Takes ourselves lightly. Choose to have a moment of connection, even if it's at our own expense, so long as the knot Jesus ties between us and God gets a little tighter.

Amen.