

“Doggedly Persistent”

Grace, peace, and mercy are yours from our God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

They're not much to look at. They have loose floppy jowls and the skin on their face hangs down almost as far as their droopy ears. They slobber and always seem to be laying around, just bone lazy. Not a very pretty picture is it? Do you have any idea what I'm describing? A dog, a bloodhound to be exact. And I'll be quite honest, the ones I've seen seem so ugly as to almost be cute or else something only a mother bloodhound could love.

But what we see on the outside is not a true picture of what's on the inside. Although a bloodhound may seem slow and lazy, in reality they are one of the most tenacious breed of dogs. In fact, once a **bloodhound** is on a scent, if the handler isn't careful, they will run themselves to death. They **will** literally track and **track until they find their quarry or die trying**. They truly have dogged persistence.

In the Gospel lesson today we see another example of dogged persistence, endurance in the face of what appears to be prejudice, mocking and name calling. Through the Apostle Matthew we **meet a Canaanite woman**, whose name is known only to God, who came to Jesus with a request, seemingly treated with scorn, but **stayed her course until she received the thing she needed**. And in so doing Jesus commended her for her faith.

I don't know about you, but when I read this episode I'm more than a little shocked at Jesus' response to the woman. I've read a number of explanations that try to soften His calling the woman a dog. And while it's true that the word He uses is one which describes the family pet and not the common term for the street scavenger, let's face it, if you or I were referred to as a dog by someone, I think we would be pretty offended.

So what's going on here? Well, Jesus is not trying to offend or chase this woman off. Rather, He's using this event to teach the woman, His disciples and you and me what it means to

have faith. He's **using this event to show all of us what our faith is based on and why we're able to be persistent** in the face of our trials and difficulties.

The events we've looked at the last two Sundays kind of set the stage for this morning's Gospel. Jesus had fed thousands of people with a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish. When He did this those people wanted to force Him to be their king and Jesus knew He had to separate His disciples from this kind of temptation. He knew that the time was drawing near when He would be arrested and He had a great deal to teach His disciples before He went to the cross. So He left the land of Israel and went to the surrounding areas controlled by Gentiles to find a little peace where He could teach His disciples about what was to come.

According to Biblical history, **the Canaanites** who lived in this area were **descendants of Noah's son Ham who was cursed to serve his brother Shem, the father of the Israelites**, because he dishonored his father after the flood.

Fast forward many centuries. After their 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, the Israelites were told to occupy the land God promised to give to Abraham. They were to remove the pagan and idolatrous Canaanites who lived there but failed to do so and an uneasy truce existed for generations. But the **Jews** still **considered themselves superior to the Canaanites** and looked down on them with hatred and disgust. In fact, there was an ultra-orthodox daily prayer that went like this: "Blessed are you O God, King of the Universe, Who has not made me a Gentile, a servant or a woman." Now, let's be clear, this is not a prayer found anywhere in the Bible. But it was a part of the piety of the ultra-orthodox Jews then and even today.

So Jesus took His disciples to get away from the crowds but when they arrived they discovered that His reputation as a healer had preceded Him even in this pagan land – a woman comes asking Jesus to heal her daughter. When this happened **the disciples** were shocked and more than a little offended that she would have the nerve to approach them with such a request, showing that they **were no different than the rest of the Jews of their day**. To them this woman was nothing more than a scruffy, good for nothing hound.

So they tell Jesus to get rid of her, to send her away because she was annoying them with her crying and weeping. Their demand of Jesus showed that they felt no pity for her because, to them, she deserved none. They **were** simply **irritated and wanted her gone**.

And this is exactly **the moment Jesus was waiting for**. The disciples expected Him to simply dismiss her. **As a Gentile she had no right to expect mercy from their Rabbi**. The one who fed 5000 people and walked on water did so only for the “deserving few,” the people of the covenant, the descendants of Abraham. So Jesus’ cutting statement made perfect sense to them: “Leave me alone, I was sent for Israel. You dogs have no right to expect anything of me.”

She had no right to expect anything. But, of course, **the Jewish disciples were different**. They had every right because **they had the right lineage**. They were Jews, children of Israel. But this woman’s growing faith saw things differently. She knelt and persistently laid her need before the One she had no right to speak to – and she was ultimately blessed.

What a shocker that must have been for the disciples. In their eyes she was a dog. And when Jesus spoke of her as such He brought their deep prejudice and sin to the surface. But, like the woman, Jesus saw things differently. He **saw** a great **faith that didn’t hold onto lineage** or personal worth **but clung onto the mercy and grace of a loving God**. And in this woman we see ourselves. We see what we are and what we are to be.

Like the woman we are totally unworthy of God’s love. Now I know this isn’t what people like to hear today. We shouldn’t put ourselves down so much. It’s bad for our self esteem to talk that way. But the truth is just what we confessed earlier in our worship. “Let us first consider our unworthiness and confess before God and one another that we” are sinners. The unfortunate thing is we don’t know how deeply this sin really runs. We fool ourselves and act as if it isn’t all that bad.

But the reality is, we are totally undeserving of God’s mercy and grace. **Each and every day we turn away from Him and go our own way**. With our mouths we betray our Savior, more often using His name as a slur than a word of praise. And when we hear others speak His

name in vain do we express our offense, that we don't appreciate hearing our Savior's name treated with contempt? We shame our God by listening to rumor and gossip, by laughing at coarse jokes, by inviting television images into our homes and our minds, images that would certainly embarrass us if the Lord were sitting in the room with us (which, of course, He is). But the sad truth is we don't even think about Him most of the time. And when we are faced with trouble or hardship we are quick to give up, quick to express our belief that God has failed us, quick to become discouraged.

All of that sounds terrible – and it is – but let's be honest, it's true. It sounds like we are a bunch of good-for-nothing dogs. **But** even though it's true, even though we're totally unworthy of God's love, He loved and loves us still. **Strange as it may seem, God was willing to die for mutts like for us.**

And that's just what we were. We were a people without a lineage, at least a lineage which mattered. We were not of the covenant race. We were Gentiles. But because of Christ's life, death, and resurrection, God has adopted us and we are now His children. We are descendants of the King of kings Himself.

Through that Canaanite woman, Jesus shows us what we are to be through Him. And He wants us to be as doggedly persistent in our faith as she was. **Like the bloodhound on the trail, we are to be single-mindedly set on the scent of God's mercy and grace.** There is nothing He cannot accomplish for us in this world. He has already done the hard part. He brought us over from death to life and given us a share of His kingdom.

Now, as Paul said in our Epistle lesson a few weeks ago: (Romans 8:32-39) ***"He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for***

us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

When troubles come to us, and they always will, we can face them with faith in a loving God who knows us and cares for us. As Warren Wiersbe once noted: “When God permits his children to go through the furnace, he keeps his eye on the clock and his hand on the thermostat.”

In our text Jesus stepped out of character, He didn't act the way we would expect our loving, kind, and gracious Savior should. But, as with all things, we see that He has a reason for doing everything He does. **He wanted the woman, the disciples – and He wants us – to see that we are to trust in Him, trust in God's goodness more than our worthiness or our sinfulness.** Rather than believing that we deserve God's love or that we are too bad for God to love, He tells us to not look at ourselves but rather to look at the cross and see what He was willing to do so we might be forgiven and renewed.

And then He tells us to trust in God's power to do as we ask. Don't let the prejudice or unbelief of those around us deter us from our course of faith. Don't let anything stand in the way, not even what seems to be God's indifference to our circumstances because He doesn't answer our prayers in the timely manner we desire. Rather, believe and know that He sees our troubles, our pains and our sorrows and in His perfect time and providence He will be the answer to all our needs. Amen.