**When the Gospel Goes to the Dogs** Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake  
Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time The House of Hope Presbyterian Church   
Mark 7:24-37 Saint Paul, Minnesota  
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John Philip Newell, an internationally acclaimed spiritual teacher, speaker (he was a Didier Seminar speaker here at House of Hope a dozen years ago), and author of many books, [as well as the former warden of Iona Abbey in the Western Isles of Scotland], recently shared a heart-breaking personal story in his new book, *The Great Search: Turning to Earth and Soul in the Quest for Healing and Home.* These are his words:

*“When my eldest son, Brendan was sixteen, he suffered a major psychotic breakdown. Suddenly he was cast into a world of fear and anxiety that toppled at times into full blown paranoia. And suddenly all the hopes and expectations we as a family had for him were dashed. Would he ever be well again? And would he be able to live the life we had always hoped for him? It was a staggering time of uncertainty and doubt in our lives as a family. And our deepest prayer of longing for him was that he would be well.”[[1]](#footnote-1)*

I share this with you because most parents would do anything for their children. In fact, desperate parents will take desperate measures to improve life for their child. And this is the exact situation we find in our gospel reading from Mark this morning where a gentile woman is watching her daughter suffer tremendously, without hope or healing. In desperation, she leaves her child and finds Jesus, begging for help.

Let’s set the scene:

In the first half of Mark 7 Jesus says that you can’t judge a book by its cover; you must look beyond external factors like nationality or religious heritage or social position to get the real story on someone’s faith. He then puts this theory into practice by traveling a good 100 miles out of his way into the region of Tyre and Sidon—into the heart of pagan-land—to make the arduous journey from the theoretical to the practical.

The protagonist is a mother who displays real chutzpah. She gets in Jesus’s face, begging him to heal her daughter. There is only one problem: she is one of the *“dogs.”* It’s a disparaging metaphor, a derogatory term popular at the time for describing *all gentiles.* It means she has no business being in the company of a Jew, much less the Messiah. The social gap is cavernous. She is like an undocumented immigrant marching into the Oval Office to see the President. Or like a bag lady trying to make an appointment with Bill Gates or Warren Buffet. She begs Jesus to heal her daughter, but it sounds as if he doesn’t have time for her.

*“Let the children [of Israel] be fed first,”* he says, *“for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”* On one level, it’s the answer you’d expect. Evidently Jesus’s long-range evangelistic plan is to go the Jews first and then later to the Greeks. So Jesus is not so much saying *no* to the woman as he is saying, *“First things first; one thing at a time.”*

Apparently, Jesus does not want to dilute his mission. But does he have to use the derogatory language of the day and call the woman a *dog?*

If we are to get past our discomfort with the name-calling, we will have to look more closely and note what Jesus does with the word. Biblical scholar, Dale Bruner, commenting on the parallel passage in Matthew, notes that Jesus puts *“Jews and gentiles under the same roof*.*”* Indeed, Jesus’s use of the diminutive form of the word *“dogs”* could be translated *“little dogs,”* or perhaps *“house dogs.”* These terms represent a step toward *including* the gentiles. Now, says Bruner, *“the gentiles are no longer outside in the streets; they are now in the house.”* And in a moment—thanks to this loving mother’s theological discernment—the dogs *“will be at the table,”* the place of true fellowship.

In any case, the woman does not back down. *Dog indeed!* She keeps right on nipping at Jesus’s heels, which highlights not only her debating skills, but her faith. She dares to take his metaphor and turn it back on him. *“Children get fed before the dogs? You’ve got that right, Lord! But even the dogs get to eat the children’s crumbs; even the pets get the scraps that fall from their master’s table!”* She is arguing that even on his own terms, there should be something from him—some scrap of grace—for someone like her who comes to him in faith. She is challenging him. *“What are you going to do, Lord: Judge me by externals only—or judge me by my heart?”*

*This becomes the day that the gospel of Jesus Christ goes to the dogs.* Where the traditions of the elders and the religious law could see only an *outcast,* Jesus sees the woman’s heart of faith. He heals her child (a long-distance, third-party healing no less). Furthermore, from this point on Jesus does not hold his saving power in reserve but expands the circle of God’s mercy to include those once considered outsiders. According to Bruner, he *“opens himself to the whole world in mission.”* He welcomes all who put their faith in him.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Which brings me back to John Philip Newell and his son’s struggle with mental illness. Newell said this:

*“A major turning came for us when we realized as a family that Brendan’s illness was not simply his. It was ours. And it was ours not only as a family but ours as a society and world. Through Brendan we came to know other young men and women struggling with mental illness. And what we learned through them and through our Brendan, was that these beautiful and often artistic young men and women are highly perceptive and sensitive spirits, and that our world, driven as it is by fear and hostility, is too much for them. It breaks them. Thus, we came to see more clearly that their struggle is not simply theirs. It belongs to us all. They are manifesting the symptoms of an unwellness that is ours as a world and as nations.*

*It made me realize in a new way that healing comes not in isolation but together … whether that be the healing of life forms that are struggling because of what humanity is doing to the environment, or races that are suffering because of the widespread sickness of racism in our world, or families that are enduring the cruelty of poverty because of the prevailing inequities of society, these are healed not in isolation but in interrelationship.*

*And in Brendan’s case, the extent of wellness that he now knows in his life has come not in isolation but through family, through networks of mental health support and medical provision, through friends, through a loving partner, through nature, and not least of all through the unflagging energies of a border collie that gets him out into the hills of the Scottish Highlands every day! And, of course, his wellness comes from the fount of healing that is deep in his own soul, made of God.”[[3]](#footnote-3)*

Friends, the day the gospel went to the dogs was the day it came to *us.* We are some of the *“little dogs”* or *“house dogs”* who have received the good news of the gospel! When Jesus opened himself up to mission to the whole world, he opened his church to the world.

Now we are to open ourselves to the whole world in mission, not through a supremacist or exclusionary mindset that has too often plagued religious systems in our world, but through love and grace.

Teri McDowell Ott, the publisher and editor of the Presbyterian Outlook, put it this way:

*“Human beings are very tribal. We are constantly sorting people into categories — who belongs, who does not, who deserves our care and attention, who does not. It seems like people of faith are especially interested in drawing lines in the sand, setting doctrinal standards, and deciding what or who is acceptable or not … I believe we should include more than we exclude. Yet, … I am quick to judge. The Syrophoenician woman who changed Jesus’ mind is also working on me.”[[4]](#footnote-4)*

She’s working on me, too.

1. John Philip Newell, *The Great Search: Turning to Earth and Soul in the Quest for Healing and Home,* Harper One, New York, NY, 2024, p. 99 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Heidi Husted, *When the Gospel Went to the Dogs (Mark 7:24-37),* The Christian Century, August 16, 2000 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Newell, *The Great Search,* pp. 99, 100 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Teri McDowell Ott, *Looking Into the Lectionary, Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost,* The Presbyterian Outlook, September 8th, 2024 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)