

II Lent 2026

Sermon – Saint Joseph Parish

Father Craig Looney

1 Thess. 4.1-8 St. Matthew 15.21-28

✠

What does it mean to call someone a “dog”? Historically, in many cultures, calling someone a dog implied they were worthless, unpleasant, disloyal or physically unattractive. The Bible generally portrays dogs as dirty scavengers roaming in packs. Why then, does Jesus who shows pity and compassion for people who ask for his help, call the mother in today’s Gospel a “dog”?

The Bible makes a clear distinction between wild and domesticated dogs. Domesticated dogs served as hunting dogs, sheep dogs, guard dogs and family pets. In Proverbs (12.10) we read...*“A good man takes care of his animals, but wicked men are cruel to theirs.”* The only breed of dog mentioned in the Bible is also found in Proverbs (30.31)...the Greyhound...a breed known for speed, affection and loyalty.

On the Sunday closest to Saint Francis Day (October 4) we bring our pets to church and bless them in our Garden dedicated to the Saint who loved animals. We acknowledge God has placed them in our care. With canines normally outnumbering felines...to say it has “gone to the dogs” might be an understatement...but in a good way...an example of Divine Reversal in action.

The Gospel is also about Divine Reversal in action. Jesus and his disciples are near the cities of Tyre and Sidon when they encounter a Canaanite woman. The Canaanites were the original inhabitants of Cana (a large area that includes modern day Israel, Lebanon, Palestine and parts of Syria and Jordan). They were pagans the Jews called “dogs” and considered unclean...not the kind of people to have over for dinner.

Our Canaanite mother comes to Jesus for help. She is taking a big risk even approaching him...she is a Gentile outsider. But her daughter “has a demon” and is in a terrible condition. We don’t know what sort of affliction the girl has. It does not matter. Her mother is brave and unafraid. She is desperate to have her daughter made well again. She shouts out loudly and addresses Jesus as “Son of David”...a title for the Messiah. She shows profound faith and recognizes his authority. At first, Jesus doesn’t answer her. Why did Jesus act as if he didn’t care about the woman or her daughter?

The disciples are annoyed by the mother's cries for help and ask Jesus to send her away. He tells them his primary mission is to his pwn people... the Jews. Our desperate mother is persistent...she will not be ignored and she will not take no for an answer. She begs Jesus to help her...right now...without any further delay. How does Jesus respond? He says it isn't right to give the children's food to dogs.

Jesus' response seems strangely out of character, but he never said or did anything without a reason. The New Testament Greek word *kuon* means "dirty junkyard dog". Jesus calls the Canaanite mother by another Greek word...*kunarion*...meaning "little puppy"...another example of Divine Reversal in action.

Our desperate mother tells Jesus even little puppies get to eat the leftovers that fall from the table. She shows great faith and humility. She believes Jesus can and would heal her daughter...she acknowledges her pedigree as a Gentile...and she isn't going to give up and run away. Jesus heals her daughter and shows just how much he cares about her and her daughter. There is no question Jesus was testing the mother. He wanted his disciples and the crowd to witness her faith. She is the perfect example of how we should respond to the tests that come our way as we continue our Lenten journey to the cross.

Our Gentile mother had the kind of faith in Jesus that compelled her to take action. It's that kind of faith Jesus wants us to show...the kind of faith that compels us to bring our cares, worries and concerns to him and the cross...believing he can and will help us sort things out and restore order to our lives...no matter how messy things get. Jesus wants us to be persistent in our prayers. There is no such thing as a prayer that goes unanswered.

Jesus offers us love, compassion, forgiveness, wholeness and healing. The Season of Lent is about the unexpected.. Everything Jesus did was for us... Lent is about Divine Reversal in action....made real for us on Good Friday. Jesus gives us his Body and Blood in the Sacrament of the Altar to strengthen and refresh us until he returns.

We can be sure when we leave here today...we will not be leaving with leftovers!

