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It was a little dog that did it. I was feeling irritated. I had to run a few additional errands instead of what I usually do that day. It was already hot and humid, even in the morning, which didn't help my mood any, and I could feel the oppressive heat already radiating off the asphalt of the parking lot. As I put my purchase in the trunk of my car, I looked up and saw a small dog, with a shape and markings similar to those of a jack Russell terrier, walking along in the bouncy jaunty way terriers do, next to its owner. What first struck me was this little dog did not have a leash on, and I marveled at its good behavior, because our dog would not be so focused in the same situation.

The owner of the dog had parked in the spot diagonal to mine, so they both stopped near me to get into their car. That is when the dog's owner noticed me noticing his dog. The owner did not smile at me, so I smiled at him, wished him a good morning and said I was impressed by his helper. The man, who by his appearance seemed very different from me, then smiled and said he was lucky to have such a good helper. Then the two of them got into the man's car and drove off, the little dog's head resting on the arm of its owner that was resting on the edge of the open car window. It's an image I could not get out of my head all day.

Because in that incredibly brief exchange, something happened. Differences between the man and me didn't matter as much as our mutual admiration for a very good dog. And that moment somehow managed to dissolve the irritation I was feeling, maybe because that moment somehow went beyond polite conversation and into the kingdom of heaven realm of treating all people with dignity and respect. A moment made possible by a little dog.

It was hard for me not to notice the little dog in the parking lot, like its equally challenging to not notice the reference to little dogs in today's Gospel, even though Jesus' reference to little dogs was not one of admiration.

We just heard in this morning's Gospel that Jesus went into Gentile territory, that is what all the location we heard mentioned means. And he's not just on the edge of Gentile territory, he's deep in it. The author of the Gospel neglects to tell us why Jesus did this. Maybe he needed a rest and decided he'd go where he thought no one knew him. Maybe he got lost. Maybe he had a feeling he needed a change of scenery. Maybe it doesn't matter. All we heard was when he reached his destination he went into a house, wanting to escape notice.

Scholars tell us that in Mark's Gospel it is not unusual for Jesus to go into houses to teach or do a miracle of healing. Mark's Gospel tends to be house-centered rather than centered around street corners, mountain tops, or the temple. So, while we might read into today's Gospel that Jesus going into a house might be his attempt to get away from it all for a while, theologically, the author of Mark may be trying to get us to pay attention, Jesus is about to do something amazing.

Mark's Gospel has another unique aspect that scholars call "the Messianic Secret", which is characterized by Jesus always telling people not to say anything about the amazing things he did or said until after his resurrection, this only happens in Mark's Gospel. But when we read Mark's Gospel, we see that Jesus' attempt to keep the secret that he is the Messiah thwarted by people at every turn of his ministry. They either go and blab about what Jesus did, even though he told them not to, like at the end of the second miracle in today's Gospel reading, or people hear about him and recognize in what they hear that very thing he is attempting to keep secret, like the woman in the first part of today's Gospel. She heard about Jesus, heard where he was, and went to him. So much for the secret.

But once this woman found him and knelt at his feet and asked him to heal her daughter, Jesus did not respond in the hospitable, compassionate, loving way we might have imagined he would or should have responded. Not only did he deny her he added insult to injury by calling her and her daughter little dogs. That sounds like a racial slur to me. And maybe it was.

Folks often ask me if Jesus had pets, some like to imagine Jesus with a loyal dog at his side as he walked around doing ministry, or hanging out with him in his carpentry workshop before his ministry began, keeping him company as the days went by. But the Jewish people of Jesus' day did not look at dogs the way we do. It's important to remember that the Judaism of Jesus' day was concerned with separation between them and non-Jews. Non-Jews were called Gentiles, and Gentiles practiced different religions and had different habits, especially around food: the preparation and the consumption of food. These habits were not just for the sake of healthy eating, it was an expression of who they are as God's people and how they practiced what they believed. And we need to remember there was no such thing as separate food for dogs in those days. Domesticated dogs did exist, and often co-existed with people, but they ate the same food as people. Dogs would fight for scraps, or garbage, and it did not go unnoticed by Jewish people that dogs ate unclean food, like Gentiles. And it was therefore a common if terribly cruel thing for pious people of Jesus' day refer to Gentiles as dogs because both were considered outsiders who were unclean in part because they ate unclean food. I am not trying to put anyone person or people down in these statements, I am only trying to convey what scholars and historians report to

help us gain a deeper insight to Jesus' statement to a woman we might see as just asking for help.

The woman in question is a Gentile. She was different from Jesus in every way: gender, religion, nationality, what she ate. Yet despite these many differences, she appears to have known the secret Jesus was trying to keep, which is why she left her suffering child to ask Jesus for help. But Jesus said no. Because she was a Gentile. Because commentators tell us he understood in the Hebrew Bible we call the Old Testament, it stated the Messiah was to first restore his own people to a right relationship with God then they would go out to the Gentiles. It was a process and he may have believed being the Messiah meant following the process. Now there is a problem with what I just said, because prior to this Jesus had helped non-Jews, but his terrible answer clearly and cruelly says no because the woman and her daughter are outsiders.

It can be tempting to be terribly disappointed in Jesus here. This may not be the Jesus we want to see. Or maybe it is, maybe we are secretly turned on by the idea that Jesus won't like the same people we don't like and will tell them no. Or maybe Jesus' answer frightens us because we are afraid when we bring God our prayers God will say no, say its not our turn or our time. Maybe we are secretly afraid God really doesn't love us. There is a lot that can weigh heavy on us in that space between Jesus' insult and the woman's response, and we need to not get lost in that space or we will miss the remarkable moment that happened next.

This unnamed woman is often credited with courage for speaking up, for putting Jesus in his place, for teaching him. But I think something far greater happened. Jesus told the woman no, because she was an outsider. But the woman's response showed Jesus that it was he who was the outsider, because he was on her turf. And in her territory, her culture did not view dogs as unclean curs, in her culture it was not uncommon for dogs to be a part of a household. They may not have had a place of equality at the table with adults and children, but in her culture, dogs would be allowed under the table where they were fed the scraps from the same meal everyone else was eating. In the woman's territory, in the very house Jesus was in, dogs were included, not excluded. And by saying so she created a moment where certain boundaries like who is and who is not loved by God dissolved, and in that moment, Jesus appeared to be enlightened, crediting the woman for her words, not her faith for the healing of her daughter. Perhaps in that moment Jesus saw God's Kingdom breaking in, which is what he proclaimed was happening, often by telling parables about all people sharing God's banquet feast, and maybe he saw his own parables come to life and realized God's Kingdom really is powerful enough to break through anything, even prejudices and processes and time lines. It was even breaking in on him.

That is why I do not think it is insignificant that Jesus' very next miracle in today's Gospel was healing a man who could not hear or speak, very different from the woman who both heard and spoke, because through that healing he dissolved those differences.

The concept of insiders and outsiders is not a foreign one to us today, especially being in Athens where differences between people who are part of the University and people who are not are often phrased as "town and gown." Closer to home, our parish is actively engaged many ministries, some are long established, and some are brand new. These ministries often have to figure out how to share the same building, and the same volunteer base. Sometimes it can feel like there isn't enough to go around, or that one ministry is losing something when it is asked to make room for another. It can get uncomfortable, and in that discomfort, it can become too temptingly easy to fall into an insider/outsider mentality, where we might hear things like "we were here first." Or "that's not what Episcopalians are really about." We can all get irritated. And in those moments of irritation, maybe we could practice looking for the little dogs that do and will come bouncing along. Not the literal jack Russell terrier I saw a day or so ago, but those moments when we can hear God whispering God's secret to us that we are all one because we are all loved and whether a ministry is new or old, big or small, it doesn't take much to realize we are all about the same thing: creating a place where those insider and outsider differences dissolve into God's love by showing respect for all people. Our ministries might look different, and we might have our differences, but those differences are what can come together to create such welcoming Kingdom of Heaven moments that are for our neighbors, our community, and for us. That is no secret to keep, but one to share.