

Sermon September 9, 2018
Isaiah 35:4-7a, Psalm 146, James 2:1-10, (11-13), 14-17, Mark 7:24-37

Food for Dogs

What *can* Jesus mean by treating this poor woman this way? “*Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.*” What can He mean? The poor woman’s little daughter is sick. Can He really mean that because she is a gentile she is not a child of God and therefore He can’t heal her daughter? *Our* Jesus said that? She is from Syrophenicia – what we might call southern Syria. Is that the reason? He can’t heal people from Syria? Or does it apply to all foreigners? What about us? We are from much further away than she is. Would He have said the same to us? He has as good as called her a dog! In my book, this woman has every reason to be offended. She isn’t of course, but we could well understand if she had been.

In a way it’s funny. Last week *Jesus* was in the same boat as this woman. Some Pharisees noticed that the disciples had not washed their hands before dinner. So naturally they immediately brought this scandalous breach of tradition to the young rabbi’s attention.

You might *think* that Jesus would appreciate this helpful correction. After all, how does it look when the followers don't wash their hands? But, no. Jesus goes up one side of them and down the other. 'You hypocrites' He calls them. 'Honouring with your lips and not in your hearts' and on and on.

It is no wonder that in Matthew's version, the disciples come to Him afterwards and say, 'Um. Jesus? Did you notice that Pharisees were *offended* by what you said?' It's no wonder.

But in a way, I can understand. After all, I mean, Jesus had just *right before that* fed the five thousand, and then walked on water. But was that good enough for the Pharisees? Oh no. Here they are nitpicking away about a bit of handwashing. And getting righteously offended too, which seems to be what Pharisees are best at. They seem to be *offended* quite a bit of the time.

That word - *offended* - plays an interesting role in the gospels, especially in Matthew. It is a theme of the book. I am indebted to David McCracken and a number

of others for the insight that if we want to understand what the gospel *is*, we need to know quite a bit more about that word *offended*.

It is one possible translation of a Greek word which also exists in English: *scandalized*. A perfectly good English word that. It is a mystery to me that the translators don't just use that word. But they don't. In each of the forty odd times *scandal* or *scandalized* appears in the Greek, they give us a bunch of different translations. *Offended* is a common one. *Causes us to sin* is another. *Stumbling block* also appears a number of times. That is an interesting one. That begins to bring us closer to the meaning. In the Greek & English interlinears that I looked up, the Greek *scandalized* (*eskandalisthEsan*¹), means *ensnared*. Literally *caught in a trap*. Further researches in the word, years ago, have shown me that the root word actually comes from middle eastern bird hunting. It is the name of a specific part of the trap: the *trigger* that causes the trap to shut.

So it is interesting. The Pharisees are *ensnared*. They have allowed themselves to be caught in a *trap* of their

¹ eskandalisqhsan, eskandalisthEsan G4624 vi Aor Pas 3 Pl [ARE-SNARED](#)

own making. Because they are *scandalized*, because they are *offended*, they cannot hear what Jesus is saying. They are inside *the trap*. He is outside. They cannot hear Him. Like the man Jesus meets immediately after the Syrophenician woman, they have ears but they cannot hear. They have eyes but cannot see.

It is true for all of us really, all human beings I think. When we are *offended* we get so mad we get tunnel vision. We can't hear or see anything but what has *offended* us. Interesting that these people are so *scandalized* by Jesus. It is especially interesting because Jesus has explicitly warned them not to be. In the Sermon on the Mount, a few chapters earlier He says this:

*Matthew 5:29-30 "If your right eye **causes you to sin**, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand **causes you to sin**, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell."*

Notice the repetition. He really wants us to hear this.

That is what it feels like to be *offended* doesn't it? When we are *scandalized*, when we are angry, our bodies feel like they are burning don't they? I think so. Our anger burns us, and Jesus is telling us how to avoid that. Do anything to avoid being *offended*. Cut off your hand. Pluck out your eye. Do *anything*, go to any length, forgive anything, make any sacrifice to avoid that.

I always love how Jesus takes His own advice. He goes all the way. He actually gives up His *life* to make this point. He gives His body so that ours won't burn the way the Pharisees burn with *offendedness* when the disciples don't wash their hands.

In John 6, which we read the week before last, Jesus says 'Blessed are those who take no *offense* at me.' The Pharisees could have avoided *the trap*. They could have chosen not to be *offended* by Him. If they *had* chosen that, they might have been able to hear Him. If they could have heard Him they would have received a blessing. But the Pharisees were *triggered* by being *offended* and they were so *scandalized* that they became *ensnared* and *fell into a trap* and so didn't

receive the blessing. Not just words of blessing, but the lived blessing of a whole new life.

But the Syrophenician woman. She *gets* it. Jesus says something *really* offensive to her, but she gets it. He more or less implies that she is a dog and therefore unworthy to receive the food that He is offering. But does she get *offended*? Does she start nitpicking the personal hygiene of the disciples? Nah. She knows, somehow, not to be offended. She does not *take the bait*, is not *triggered*, does not fall into *the trap of being scandalized*. So she receives, instead, a blessing! Her little daughter is healed of an ‘unclean spirit.’ The demon leaves her body.

The whole thing goes like this:

²⁶Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷He said to her, ‘Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.’ ²⁸But she answered him, ‘Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.’ ²⁹Then he said to her, ‘For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.’ ³⁰So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

So there you go. Food for dogs? Or food for thought.