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The Care and Feeding of Dogs

Mark 7:28

Recent tensions over immigration in our nation have brought to the surface our long history of prejudice toward newcomers. Timothy Egan's bestselling book on the Dust Bowl, *The Worst Hard Time*, describes German immigrants who were almost run out of Western Oklahoma in the early part of World War I. George Ehrlich was a farmer who came to America in 1890 from the Volga region of Russia where his family had been part of a German settlement since 1763. He was seeking out a living on 160 acres near Shattuck, Oklahoma. With ten children in the country school George sometimes invited the teacher to spend the weekend in his home. When she saw a picture of the Kaiser in Erlich's house she reported it to authorities. Two days later, police surrounded the Ehrlich homestead. After making a thorough search of the house George and eleven other German immigrants were arrested and placed in the local jail. When word reached the sheriff that someone was organizing a mob to hang them as spies, the German immigrants were taken to Woodward, Oklahoma. There they were hauled before a federal judge in the middle of the night. Egan describes what happened next in these words:

About 2 a.m., Judge T. R. Alexander appeared, bleary-eyed. The police explained that they had rounded up a pro-German cabal. One of the Germans, who was retarded, started sobbing, blubbing in his native language. A guard told him to shut up-if he heard another Kraut word out of any of them, he would cut their hearts out. He flashed a knife.

"George Ehrlich," the judge said, repeating the name several times. "What are you doing here?"

The judge remembered Ehrlich from an earlier appearance, when he came to Woodward for citizenship proceedings.

"What are you doing here?" the judge asked again.

"I cannot talk," Ehrlich answered in his hybrid English-German. "This guard will stab my heart out."

"You talk to me," Judge Alexander told him. "Now what are you people here for? It's the middle of the night."

"Pit-schur."

"What's that? A picture?"

"Yah."

An officer produced the picture that Ehrlich kept in his house-Kaiser Wilhelm and his family in formal pose.

"That's a beautiful picture," the judge said, then turned to the police, "Is that all you got against these people?"

"They're pro-German. They're hurting the war effort. Spies, for all we know."

The judge turned to the Germans from the Volga. "How many of you are supporting America in the war?"

All hands went up. Ehrlich reached into his pocket and produced two hundred dollars' worth of government stamps issued to support the war effort. A friend produced war bonds. The judge looked at the sheriff and asked him how many of *his* officers had war bonds or stamps. None.

“Take these people home,” the judge said. “If anything happens to them I’ll hold you responsible (pages 71-72).”

In the seventh chapter of Mark’s gospel Jesus and the disciples are dealing with the same kind of prejudice. They have traveled to the region of Tyre, a country we now know as Lebanon. After arriving they go to a house to rest. But as so often happens, Jesus’ privacy is interrupted by someone asking for help. A desperate looking woman rushes into the house and falls at Jesus’ feet. She is a Syro-Phoenician woman who has come to beg Jesus to heal her daughter.

One can imagine the response of the disciples to a situation like this. This unwelcome intrusion reveals something of the cultural differences which separated Jews from their Gentile neighbors. First of all breaking in on a group of men is not a lady-like thing to do. Nice Jewish girls know better than to do that sort of thing. This appears to be a woman with an attitude. Her inappropriate behavior fits the disciples’ stereotype of an ill-mannered and unclean Gentile. They have been taught from childhood that they should have no dealings with people like this. The disciples are waiting for Jesus to throw her out.

The disciples are not disappointed with Jesus’ initial reaction to the woman. Showing no compassion for the woman he gives voice to the bigotry of his culture. He speaks openly to the woman what the disciples believe but probably would not say to her face. He tells her that “...it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs (Mark 7:27).” As bigoted as the disciples are, even they must be surprised by the naked brutality of this insult.

One commentator has pointed out that not only is Jesus insulting a Gentile woman, he may also be insulting dog lovers everywhere. Hans Mol writes:

It is obvious that when Jesus uses the word “dogs” he does not mean the nice affectionate dog we used to have on the farm... while I grew up. I still remember my mother crying when Henny died of old age. I remember it so well because it was the only time I ever saw my mother cry. Nor did Jesus have in mind the...loveable Dalmatian who sits under the table at my daughter’s place...hoping that my grandchildren who are messy eaters will be more messy than usual. No, Jesus meant it in the sense of “inferior (Calvin for the Third Millennium page 71).”

Jesus is using a common expression of speech which was understood as a racial or cultural slur. Various ways of rationalizing what Jesus said or may have meant have been proposed, but none of them is very convincing. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that when Jesus encountered this Gentile woman he assumed that his call did not extend beyond the Jewish people. Indeed, John Calvin pointed out that it was this encounter with the Gentile woman that led Jesus to reconsider the scope of his mission.

The response of the woman reframes the issue for Jesus and his disciples. She says, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs (Mark 7:28).” With these words she reveals what is in her heart. She demonstrates her willingness to break down the racial and cultural walls that separate her people from their neighbors. By offering to take the crumbs she sets aside her people’s notion of superiority over the Jews. She refuses to be defined by the hostility that has marked the relationship between Gentiles and Jews. Mark saw this as a moment when the will of God breaks through to Jesus. Suddenly Jesus realizes that his mission must include the Gentiles. Now Jesus responds with compassion telling the Gentile woman that her daughter is healed. Then Jesus follows up by healing another Gentile, a man who could not speak.

Mark used these healings to help his readers understand that it was OK that they were having trouble accepting Gentiles as equals. It is never easy to overcome the notions of racial and cultural superiority that have been planted in us. Even Jesus had to struggle to come to terms with God's love for the whole human family.

Twenty-five years ago a Methodist church in an urban area of Miami was having a very difficult time as its members were moving to the suburbs and joining other churches. The smaller membership could no longer afford to make major repairs to the building. It was decided to invite a minority congregation of the same denomination to share the building. They sold their old building and used the money from the sale to make the major repairs for their new shared building. A few years later conflicts emerged between these two groups. The Methodist bishop came in to settle the dispute. He began by telling the minority group that they were guests of the original congregation.

The bishop was wrong. He forgot that both congregations had invested in the building. But most of all, he forgot that both groups are guests of the true owner of the church. That is the truth that Mark wanted his church to remember. Because all of us are guests, there is no place for bigotry.