

“Jesus and the Dogs” / Mark 7:24-30 / 9 September 2012

You know, it really is hard to ask for help the way this poor woman asked, groveling at Jesus’ feet. But did you notice that Jesus called that woman “a dog”? Truly asking for help, sometimes, is an act of courage. I’ve gotten hooked on a TV drama about a guy who’s just too proud to ask for help. The show is called *Breaking Bad*, and it’s about a brilliant high school chemistry teacher named Walter White, out in Albuquerque, who is diagnosed with inoperable lung cancer. Walter has just turned fifty. He’s got lots of regrets, and he teaches his classes out of pure necessity, making a mere fraction of what he could be earning if not for one poor decision long ago. His knowledge of chemistry and his passion for it far surpass anything that his indifferent students could even begin to grasp. But a man has to provide for his family. He’s got a pregnant wife and a fifteen-year-old son with cerebral palsy. His insurance plan doesn’t cover the prestigious, top-notch oncologists, and his doctor gives him about two years to live. Oh, and Walter has a brother-in-law who’s a police officer in the Drug Enforcement Agency. One day while Walter is riding along with his brother-in-law on a drug bust, he notices one of his former high school students escaping the scene. Instead of blowing the whistle on the kid, Walter goes to that drug dealer’s home and cuts a deal with him. Let me in on the action. I’m a chemist. I can cook the best meth-amphetamines on the market. I’ll cook the stuff, and you sell it. It’s all a desperate bid to make as much money as possible before he dies...just so that his family will be taken care of. He’s got well-to-do friends who offer to pay for his treatments. Nothing doing! Walter is too proud to accept. His son with cerebral palsy starts a website soliciting donations for his father’s cancer treatments, www.savewalterwhite.com. The kid is so proud and happy to be helping his dad. But Walter is mortified. He feels like a beggar with a tin cup.

It’s hard to ask for real help. Walter’s even too proud to accept help from the people who love him. And so, Walter the mild-mannered chemist and schoolteacher, becomes a drug lord. He teams up with his former student, a clueless stoner who still calls him “Mr. White,” and they buy an old RV to drive out into the desert to cook “meth,” a high-dollar drug that can be made from over the counter allergy medicines. Old Walter makes the finest meth in the Southwest, so much so that he attracts the attention of the brutal Mexican drug cartels. And there are murders. And there are briefcases full of money, exchanged in junkyards. There are kidnappings. And there are all kinds of violent, crazy, drug addicted characters, and seedy attorneys, and crooked cops. But to me, the most striking thing of all is the great irony that Walter begins to lose the very family he is trying to save. The show comes to be about the pain of living a double life, of lying to the people you love, hiding, and sneaking, and deceiving. And it’s all because Walter is too proud—too cowardly—to take help from anyone!

Well, I know where he’s coming from, don’t you? We can sympathize, you and me. Though most of us don’t mind offering help to those in need, we sure don’t like to be on the receiving end of it. It makes us feel weak and dependent. Indeed, years ago, I knew a woman who died of cancer because she was too independent even to talk to her doctor about it. She knew about the cancer, but she wasn’t the kind to complain. She didn’t want anyone making a fuss over her, taking up collections, having fundraisers at the town fire hall. She preferred to die quietly, rather than to let the people who loved her walk with her through illness. And we’ve all known people who struggle alone with

other diseases like depression, and alcoholism, and anxiety. All eminently treatable, but asking for real help is just so hard.

That's why I like this persistent foreign woman who begs Jesus for help for her sick daughter. Now, it's true that a parent will bear all manner of shame and abuse for the sake of a sick child. But I marvel at Jesus' gruff response to this unhappy mother. "Let me take care of my own people first; it's not fair to throw the children's food to the dogs." Why did he make her feel so small, adding insult to the humiliation she was surely already feeling? Why did he call her "a dog"? Here in suburbia, a dog is a symbol of faithfulness, protection, and love. But in that time and place, to call a person a "dog" implied that he or she was a dirty scavenger. To be called a "dog" even carried a hint of sexual deviance. But the foreign woman keeps her dignity about her. She continues the whole "dog" analogy and says, "But even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the children's table." It's perhaps the only time in the gospels when another person outwits Jesus in a debate. And Jesus is astounded by her sharp reply. Perhaps with a grin, he responds, "Great answer! For saying that, your daughter has been made well."

It's definitely not Jesus' finest hour. And leave it to loudmouth Mark to tell the tale without mercy. Unlike Matthew, Luke, and John, the gospel writer Mark administers his medicine without a spoonful of sugar. Mark's Jesus is so very human. In Mark, Jesus groans as he struggles to bring about healing. In Mark, Jesus sighs when he comes up against distrust. In Mark, Jesus has to try twice before he can manage to heal a certain blind man. He mixes clay with spittle, more like a traditional medicine man than a miracle worker. Mark's Jesus gets tired, and angry, and sometimes even scared. This is the strange power of Mark's gospel; Jesus is earthy and human. Mark's Jesus is capable of changing, and growing, and learning from...even the dogs.

One day a lonely frog decided to dial the Psychic Hotline to find out if anyone would ever fall in love with him. The frog's personal psychic advisor told him, "I do see someone in your future! You are going to meet a beautiful young girl who will find you fascinating. She will want to learn everything about you." The frog was thrilled. He croaked, "This is great! Where will I meet her? At a dinner party? On a cruise ship?" The psychic advisor hesitated for a moment, then said, "Um, no. In biology class."

We don't usually get magical solutions to our mundane troubles. No, instead we—who are just regular people—end up getting other regular people to help us solve our problems. Sometimes we have to be courageous enough to ask for help. And we have to be humble enough to accept it. That's the lesson I draw from this story of Jesus' unkind remark to the foreign woman. This mother of a sick child humbled herself by coming to Jesus, swallowing her pride, begging for help. And she got help. But in the process, she helped Jesus. She helped him to expand the scope of his vision beyond his own kind of people to include the larger world. Read the rest of Mark from this point onward. The new theme on Jesus' lips is "the world." Up to this point, he had talked a lot about the lost sheep of Israel. But after this foreign woman helps him to stretch his horizons, Jesus begins to talk about his mission to the world.

Oh, this big, troubled world that God so loved! It will take whatever help you can give it. Sometimes it will ask for that help. Sometimes it will demand. Sometimes it will sit quietly in its misery, never even expecting you to notice. Oh, this big world! Even the dogs can see that it's not right! And even the dogs can teach us a little something about how to fix it. I find that most people want to be part of the world's

solutions because it feels good. It's gratifying, and even makes us feel a little powerful. Rarely do we want to be the ones asking for help because it seems demoralizing. But sometimes the best way to help someone else is to swallow our pride and allow that person to help us. For sometimes the one asking for our help is, indeed, offering us a kind of help we didn't even know we needed. It's like those bumper stickers you see on cars that encourage people to adopt pets from "rescue shelters." The stickers read, "Who rescued who?" The stranger in need is more than an opportunity to make us feel good about ourselves. If we have the humility and the teachability to bear it, that person often becomes our tutor, our guide, our unexpected friend.

Once, long ago when I was a smug young man full of judgment and scorn, the village drunk tried to give me a bit of advice. It was good advice, and if I had heeded it, I would have spared myself years of trouble. But I didn't take his advice because he was the village drunk. And my narrow-minded pride caused untold grief. That drunk was to me what the foreign woman was to Jesus, a dog. And yet, I'm inspired by a Jesus who is humble and courageous enough to accept fresh insights from a woman on the outer margins of his society. And it begs the question, Who are the dogs in your life? Who are the people whose insights you will not allow to instruct you? Whose wisdom do you refuse to hear because you cannot see past that person's history, or politics, or gender, or race, or nationality? It's so hard to hear wisdom from people who've hurt us, or disappointed us, or scared us, but sometimes we must. And who are the dogs in our world—the Muslims who, despite their angry rhetoric, often have valid complaints about the wastefulness of Western culture, the political radicals who really are right about the unjust practices of Wall Street, the unchurched who have some very good reasons for not liking church. We all need to go to the dogs every once in a while. The dogs often know things about goodness, and beauty, and truth that the saints could never imagine.

And so, as a minor theme, I would say, have the humility and the courage to ask for help when you need it. But the main point of this story is that we must be openhearted enough to know that the person asking for our help may indeed have much to offer us. Listen to the dogs in your life and in our world. If more people listened to their dogs, then this world would have a lot less name-calling and a lot more peace. In the 1500s, the Anglican theologian Richard Hooker said, "I pray that none will be offended if I seek to make the Christian religion an inn where all are joyously received, rather than a cottage where some few friends of the family are to be received." Let this be a house where even the dogs have a place at the table. Amen.