

**DATE:** September 7, 2003

**SUNDAY:** Ordinary 24

**SERMON:** Going to the Dogs

**TEXTS:** Mark 7:24-30; James 2:1-17

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One of the delights of summer, as you know well, is fresh corn-on-the-cob. It's a taste treat that for many years we shared with our dog Missy, a lovable mutt who was half Golden Retriever and half Alaskan Husky.

We always used to buy a couple of extra ears for her. She would eat it just like a person does. She would hold the ends of the ear down with her front paws, and gnaw the corn off the ear, turning it as she went, until she had gotten every kernel off the cob.

But there the similarity ended. Missy, like most dogs, was incapable of making the fine distinctions that we humans are capable of making. When we finished eating all the kernels off our ears of corn, we would throw the cobs into the garbage. We could distinguish between the desirable grains and the tough and tasteless cob. But Missy made no such distinctions. And after she finished eating all the corn off the cob, she'd then proceed to eat the cob as well. And if there wasn't a fresh ear of corn available, she was quite happy to root through the garbage, if she could get at it, and dig out a smelly old corn cob that may have been covered with discarded coffee grounds or the remains of the previous night's spaghetti or any number of other disgusting things.

The ability to apply reason and logic and aesthetic sensibility and moral concerns and make very fine distinctions between one thing and another, one course of action and another, is one of the things that define what it means to be human. When we say of someone that he or she is a person of discriminating taste, we mean it as a compliment. It's a mark of sophistication, and is the result of upbringing, training, and experience. It's a good thing to be able to discriminate between truth and falsehood, between right and wrong, between safe and unsafe. We call this ability to make distinctions our capacity for judgment, and it is

one of the marks of maturity. We don't expect the same level of ability to make discriminating judgments from a twelve year-old that we do from a thirty year-old or a sixty year-old. After that, of course, some of us start into our "second childhood" phase of life, and then all bets are off. Sometimes the second childhood phase begins in our mid-forties and we dress it up and call it a mid-life crisis.

However, we also talk about discrimination in a negative sense, as when we speak of discriminating against someone on the basis of prejudice or stereotyping. Discriminations that assign comparative value to people, whether based on external characteristics such as a person's economic circumstances or skin color or ethnic origin or cultural behavior patterns are wrong because they dehumanize people; they don't take the real flesh-and-blood person seriously, but lump each individual together with a whole group and consign the whole group to the same (usually unfavorable) judgment. Actually, this is not so much discrimination as a failure of discrimination. When we treat others on the basis of prejudice or stereotypes, we are not being discriminating enough to really see past the externals like culture, ethnicity, or gender to the real humanity of the Other, to the image of God that both we and the Other share. And this is the subject of both our lessons this morning.

In the passage from the Epistle of James, James says, *Alf a person with gold rings and fine clothes comes into your worship service, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, >Have a seat here, please,' while to the poor person you say, >Stand over there, or sit here on the floor by my feet,' have you not made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? . . . If you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.@*

Historians of early Christianity are mostly agreed that it was the experience of belonging to a community where a person could be loved impartially and accepted

regardless of which ethnic group or social class they were from that was a large factor in the success of the early Christian movement. Not that they always did it perfectly; if they had, the author of James would not have had to write what he did. Old habits of mind and heart die hard, as we well know, but somehow, the early Christian communities transcended those old habits and learned new habits of treating people impartially, because, they believed, that's the way God had treated them. Living consciously in the light of that truth made it easier to love others impartially.

In our gospel lesson, we see Jesus being accosted by a Gentile pagan woman. She has heard about his ministry of healing, and has come to plead with him to heal her daughter. *It's not fitting to take the children's bread and give it to the dogs,* Jesus tells her. Jesus is not paying her a compliment. Gentiles were often stereotyped as "dogs" by Jews of Jesus' day. Jesus' remark here has often been recognized, even by the early Church Fathers, as something of an embarrassment. Commentators have tried to get around this embarrassment by saying that Jesus was just joking, or some other equally lame explanation, but it is to the credit of the church that it preserved this potentially embarrassing story about Jesus, because it shows Jesus transcending the deeply-rooted cultural taboos and prejudices in which he had been brought up.

He is helped by the woman herself, who, will not allow herself to be dismissed simply because she is a member of a class of despised people; her reply to Jesus has an ironic hook in it. *Yes, but even the dogs get to eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table.* And Jesus is hooked; he responds to her now on a different level. He discriminates between this woman as a stereotypical representative of a despised class of people. and this woman as a heartsick mother who was afraid of losing her daughter. He discriminates between a view of a God who is the exclusive property of a particular tribe or ethnic group and a God whose love is all-inclusive and impartially showered upon every single one of his

creatures, even upon sinners or Gentile Adogs. In a very real sense, in this story, Jesus is going to the dogs. He mediates that all-inclusive love of God to one whom his own culture and upbringing has taught him to despise and grants her heart's desire. *For that saying, you may go— the evil spirit has left your daughter.*

As disciples of Jesus, that's what we are called to do also— to become discriminating enough to get past the stereotypes, past the learned cultural value judgments that we've been brought up with, past the outward behavior patterns or appearances to see the person as a person, to see the bond of humanity that unites us to the other, to see in the other, as we see in ourselves, the very image of God

I heard Fred Craddock tell a story that, for me, at any rate, drives home this point about as clearly and memorably as anything I've read or heard. (Fred was the commencement speaker at Bangor Seminary this year, and, until his retirement, was probably the leading professor of preaching in America.)

Fred was invited to a university up in British Columbia to give a series of lectures. It was in early March, and in Atlanta where Fred lived, spring had already sprung, so after hearing that the weather was similar in British Columbia, he took only a light spring jacket with him, a cap, and nothing for his feet except a pair of leather dress shoes.

When he awoke the morning after he arrived, and looked out his motel window, he couldn't see anything. During the night, an unexpected blizzard had come along, and the snow was drifted six feet deep against the door of his motel and his window was completely blocked.

While he was wondering what to do, the phone rang, and it was the head of the department telling him that the snow was so deep that nothing was moving and the lectures would have to be cancelled. He was sorry, but the whole university was closed. When Fred asked him what he was going to do about eating or getting out, he said replied that since

the airport was out of commission at least for a day or two until they got some of the snow cleared away, Fred would just have to stay in his motel room. As for eating, well, there was a diner near the bus station about a mile from where he was staying, and he would have to walk there.

Well, this was just terrific news! But since he was getting very hungry, he decided he'd better try to make it to the diner. Since Fred doesn't have much hair anymore, he stuffed his cap with toilet paper from the bathroom to try to keep his head warm, tucked his pant legs into his socks, and put on his lightweight dress shoes and spring-weight jacket, and then opened the door to be greeted by a blast of bitter Arctic cold.. First he had to break through the snowdrift, with no gloves or tools of course, and he was covered with snow by the time he did that. But somehow, he managed to make it that mile to the diner. When he staggered through the door, more frozen than alive, chilled to the bone in his light jacket and no boots, he immediately noticed that the place was full of people who looked like lumberjacks. They were all big, very big. (And Fred is a very short, slightly built man himself.) They were all dressed in big heavy woolen coats with fur-lined parkas or hats with earmuffs. They all had big boots on their feet. And they were all silently staring at him like he was some sort of alien from outer space. He made his way to an empty table and sat down, and once he got seated, all the big, burly lumberjacks went back to eating whatever it was they were eating and he was left alone to try to thaw out. No one was talking. There was only the sound of slurping soup. Another big guy, this one in a greasy white apron with foodstains all down the front, came out from behind the counter and said to him, AYa want something to eat? You can have soup.@ Since this was breakfast, Fred said, ANo, thank you. I think I'd prefer some bacon and eggs.@ The guy in the apron said, AYou can have soup. So Fred said, AThank you very much, soup sounds just fine.@

The guy came back in a minute or two with a big bowl of some steaming liquid, and Fred said he took a good look at that soup and it was gray. In it were floating some things he didn't recognize. And it smelled bad too. But since it was hot and he was cold and hungry, and since all these big lumberjack-types were eating it too, he decided to give it a try. It was terrible! It tasted as bad as it looked and smelled. He'd never eaten worse soup. So he pushed his bowl away from him, and was about ready to adopt fasting as a new lifestyle, when the door opened, and a draught of cold air made everyone look up.

It was a woman coming through the door. She looked pretty rough. It was obvious she was poor. Like Fred, she wasn't dressed for such weather, but in her case, it was because she didn't own appropriate clothes. Her face and ears and hands were red with the cold. The big lumberjacks all just stared for a moment, then went back to slurping their soup as she made her way over to the table behind Fred.

The big guy in the greasy white apron came over and said, AYa wanna eat? You can have soup.@ She replied, ACould I just have a glass of water, please. I don't have any money to buy anything.@ The guy in the apron said, AThen you'll have to leave. Nobody stays here unless they eat something.@ She said, AAll right, but could I just sit here for a few minutes until I warm up before going back out?@ He said, ANope, if you wanna eat you can stay. Otherwise, out you go.@

Fred said that he was just about ready to speak to the waiter to say that he would buy some soup for the woman, but before he could get a word out of his mouth, every one of the big lumberjacks, without saying a word, stood up, began to zip up their parkas, and head for the door.

The guy in the apron looked around and growled, AAwright, awright, she can stay.@ The lumberjacks paused, but didn't return to their seats, so he threw up his hands and continued, AAnd I suppose I'll have to give her some soup, too.@ Without a word, all the lumberjacks turned around and sat back down

and went back to slurping soup. The guy in the apron brought the woman a bowl of the same greasy, gray, foul-tasting concoction as everybody else had, and put it down in front of her. She smiled gratefully, and began to eat as though she were starved.

No one looked at her, no one said a word. Fred was still astonished at what had happened, so he turned to the big burly guy sitting at the next table and asked, "What was all that about?" The guy didn't even meet his eyes. He just turned red as though embarrassed and muttered, "If she ain't welcome, ain't none of us welcome," and went back to eating his soup.

Fred shook his head in wonder, then decided that if everyone else could stomach that soup, he probably ought to give it another try. This time, he said, when he tasted it, it wasn't so bad. In fact, it tasted pretty good. And it reminded him vaguely, of something he'd tasted before, many times before but in a very different setting. It reminded him, he said, of the taste of bread and wine.

When we gather for our *eucharist*, our thanksgiving, around the Lord's Table, we gather celebrate the fathomless love of a God who's always "going to the dogs," as it were, a God who crosses all boundaries to love all of us impartially and completely and everlastingly. And as we give thanks, we too learn to step over the boundaries to love impartially those around us. And the more we give ourselves to learning how to do that, the more we begin to understand what heaven is.