

## **Sermon August 16, 2020**

*Pastor Sam Lovett: "2020 Love Songs"*

Today we have scripture about the underdog; about the underdog overcoming, and about Jesus changing his mind about something. We get to appreciate in this scripture today Jesus' humanity. After several weeks of getting to appreciate Jesus' divinity over the past week's scripture readings with the feeding of the 5,000 with the loaves and fishes, and in walking on water. This week a very human Jesus under duress, pressured by his disciples to do and act a certain way, and after a moment of pause and clarity, he decides to do something else than that which he originally intended to do. He decides that God's grace is large enough for everyone.

This Gospel reading from Matthews also features a Canaanite woman who comes to Jesus for help who is unnamed in scripture. The Gospeler doesn't record her name, and we know that there is power in a name, in what things are called. So, for today we'll call her by a common Canaanite name for her time: *Donatiya*.

This scripture is also interesting because it includes discussions of dogs, and I am a dog lover, and so, attuned to the presence of dogs in all of scripture.

Jesus says, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel. It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs." To which Donatiya contradicts him saying, "Yes it is, Lord. Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." She is saying that Jesus has it within him to feed everyone.

But we'll get to all of that along the way.

The scripture about dogs reminds me a poetry reading I went to when as a college student at Boston College. The poet giving the reading that night was Charles Simic, who was at that time soon to become the US Poet Laureate of the United States. And what I didn't know at the time, but that is interesting for us here this morning is that Simic has taught at the University of New Hampshire since the early 1970s. That night, he read in his deep voice with Serbian accent from his then-new book, "The Voice at 3am."

He read a poem about a six-legged dog that has stuck with me to this day. I have to confess, I don't really remember the words (I had to look them up for this sermon), but I'll never forget the emotion and tone with which he read the poem.

There was clearly some meaning and significance coming through his reading, beyond the literal meaning of the words he was saying, that showed that this story was important to him.

This poem begins,

If you didn't see the six-legged dog,  
It doesn't matter.  
We did, and he mostly lay in the corner.  
As for the extra legs,

One got used to them quickly  
And thought of other things.  
Like, what a cold, dark night  
To be out at the fair.

This poem itself isn't particularly interesting. That's kind of how I feel about the way Jesus talks about dogs to represent something that is less-than. He says, I have come to a particular group, the Israelites, not others who I see as less-than. But the way that Donatiya talks about the dogs as worthy of eating from their master's scraps is an emotional reply that only comes from someone who has perhaps struggled and made due with scarce resources, and who will not take no for an answer from this person who has it in the power and ability to heal her daughter.

Jesus responds to the emotion in her voice and the conviction of her words.

This is the point I want to focus on this morning. Sometimes we need help to hear the meaning of the words beyond the words themselves, to find the meaning of what God is speaking to us. We're living in a distressed and stressful year. These are times when people feel incredibly stressed, and not themselves. It's been a different and challenging kind of year.

So I think we can see a little bit of that in Jesus in this reading from Matthew, which is why throughout this week I've been referring to this as COVID scripture.

The disciples say they want Donatiya to go away. She has been bugging us and crying out at us for a long time, they say. And Jesus, in his reply, backs up their point of view telling her that he is not sent for her. He's tired, he's in a new place, surrounded by people who have been gone from home for a long time and away from the familiar for a long time. We can't blame Jesus for his harsh words, just as

we can't completely blame those who lash out in grocery stores or at other public places who are feeling the fear of COVID-19.

Perhaps Donatiya could hear below his words to what he was really saying in that moment which was: "I'm overwhelmed, I'm tired, this is all new to me, I've been working hard to do as God would have me do, but I have my own doubts about this, and I need some help here."

And in her persistence, she is able to provide some direction for him. To invite him into a larger definition of God's grace to help someone outside of his in-group.

The same can be seen in the signs on the road that I drive by from home to come over to the church. Along the road people have been putting up signs since March:

- Love is the answer
- Be strong
- Stay home
- Love one another

The last was,

- Live free or die in your own state

Below all of these messages, even the last one, we have to hear not the words themselves, but some of the messages and concern behind it.

The sermon title for this week was, "2020 Love Songs." That's the title I had last Monday and I spent the week trying to get to that title. I think that the essence for the hope for that title was that love songs are usually pretty straightforward. The message is usually pretty clear. But in 2020 they are not. This year, we are invited to listen below the words to what someone is actually telling us.

- This is the power of poetry.
- This is the urgency of poetry and art to help us communicate this year when we cannot communicate with each other in the ways we are used to.

The good news is that we belong. You belong. We belong to each other, because compassion from each other, from Jesus, and God throughout creation, has been shown to us. We are no longer left in our despair—like the woman in this story, Donatiya—to be endlessly at risk, because we belong to each other. We can trust, and we can care for each other better because of that. Amen.