

Feed my dogs: *Matthew 15: 21-28*

by [Garret Keizer](#) in the [July 28, 1999](#) issue

Given current trends in North American Christianity and culture, I can easily imagine a day when a child, seeing a crucifix for the first time and asking her mother what on earth it might be, will receive this answer: "That, my dear, is someone who did not take very good care of himself."

This will strike you as farfetched only to the extent that you do not read self-help books, watch your local PBS station (insofar as there remains any difference), or spend time hanging out with clergy. To do any of these three even in moderation is almost inevitably to come face-to-face with the notion that a truly good shepherd *never* lays down his or her life for *anybody*. One begins to anticipate a new translation of the gospel in which the resurrected Christ will say to Simon Peter, "Do you love me?" and when Simon insists that he does, Christ will reply, "Then feed yourself."

Having said this, I might surprise you if I also say that convincing people to take care of themselves is one of the greatest pastoral challenges I know. And it remains such a challenge precisely because of the ubiquitous lip service this culture pays to "taking care of ourselves." Once the sheep have heard the false ring of "a stranger's voice," even when there's some merit in the stranger's advice they will fly from it. At that point it takes the Good Shepherd himself to bring them back to health and balance.

Fortunately, that is precisely what the Good Shepherd does in the story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman. It is certainly not one of the sweeter stories about Jesus. I used to cringe whenever it came up in the lectionary. To preach on it always felt like an exercise in equivocation; to remain silent seemed to imply that the story was indeed as awful as it sounded. These days, I find the story invaluable. It offers a rule of thumb that even the most skeptical and compulsive overachiever seems able to appreciate.

What the gospel tells us, first of all, is that even Jesus sets limits. Even Jesus does not expect to help everybody. He is sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. He

can refuse to answer a ringing telephone. "He did not answer her a word."

But even Jesus, who presumably has divine authorization for his limits ("I was sent . . ."), allows those limits to be stretched by another's necessity. In other words, the rule here is that there is no rule, only a creative tension between our finite capacities and the world's infinite need. And we shall perhaps have more energy for meeting the latter if we stop believing that the presence of tension in our lives argues for some deficiency in our faith. The servant is not above his master.

That said, it is important to recognize that the Master is only one of two principal characters in this poignant drama. There is also the mother with the sick child. I think of her as a single mother with no status and few material resources. Had she a husband or some other male advocate, would she not have sent him to negotiate with the rabbi? Instead she goes herself.

We can certainly recognize her counterpart today. We can recognize her as that object of bipartisan contempt: by the right, which sees her as a threat to "the family" (whereas she may in fact be its last remaining vestige), and by those others (I refuse to call them the left) who see her primarily as an embarrassment, a woman who should have "had it all" but who has somehow managed to have not much at all.

I've met her, of course, and so have you. When my daughter was only three months old we had to take her to the pediatric ward of a large hospital far from home. Mercifully, our stay was short; the physicians' alarm proved unfounded. For other families, visits there were heartbreakingly routine. I remember in particular one mother and child who shared our room. Her son had an extreme form of cerebral palsy; one evening we were awakened when he nearly choked to death on his own saliva. Nurses and doctors rushed into the room and saved him. I retain the image of his mother in the morning, the face hard with worry, the soothing words tendered in a hoarse voice.

Now I wonder: How did she "take care of herself"? What did she get by way of "centering" beyond a few hurried cigarette breaks? If no one feeds the sheep, you see, then the only people who can truly take care of themselves are those already well taken care of. I forget the name of the movie in which I heard it, but I remember the line: "Depression is for the middle classes. The rest of us have to go to work in the morning." This is a shabby statement about mental illness, but an irreproachable statement about the illness that separates the haves of our world from the have-

nots.

If the Canaanite woman could bring about repentance (a turning) in Jesus himself, what stones we are if she does not convert us too. "O woman, great is your faith!" he exclaims—this after he has characterized her as one of the "dogs." He might almost have said, O Woman, you *are* faith. Faith with a steadfast heart, a dead-end job and a sick kid. Maybe the time has come to put stained-glass images of the Canaanite woman in our churches. Then, if some child should ever point to a crucifix and ask, "Who is that?" we can point to the window and answer, "Find her, and she will tell you."