

Lassie Gospel Matthew 15:21-28  
 Saint Marks UMC, Charleston, WV – 9th Sunday after Pentecost (August 14,) 2011

“**Preacher, can my dog go to heaven?**” asked **Wilma**, who had gotten to the point in years, where she wasn’t really sure which one would end up there first – her or Lassie.

Before the preacher got a chance to answer, **Sam**, another member of the class spoke up, “**Of course not, Wilma. Dogs don’t go to heaven. Only people do.**”

“**Well, that’s just not so,**” said **Loretta**, a third member of the class. “**You just don’t read the Bible, is your problem, Sam! Right here – let me read it to you:**

“I said in my heart with regard to human beings that God is testing them to show that they are but animals. For **the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same**; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and **humans have no advantage over animals**; for all is vanity. **All go to one place**; all are from dust, and all turn to dust again. Who knows whether the human spirit goes upward and the spirit of animals goes downward...’ from (Ecclesiastes 3:18-21)

“**And, furthermore, Sam,**” Loretta continued, “**it says in the Book of Revelation that you like to quote from all the time:**

“Then I saw heaven opened, and **there was a white horse!**’ (Revelation 19:11)

“**If God is gonna take horses to heaven, then I’m pretty sure that Wilma’s little Lassie has got a pretty good chance.**”

“**Well, that’s just poppycock!**” Sam replied. Suddenly -- the salvos having been launched and the battle lines drawn – the time had come to draw the preacher in to the fray, to cause somebody to think he’s smart and someone else to think he’s dumber than a rock. “**What do you say, preacher?**”

Now **Rev’d Sternhouse** was no a rookie preacher. He had been around the barn, the track, and the potato house enough times to smell a trap when it was laid. He smelled this one out from the time Sam launched the first broadside attack on sweet Wilma, who’d never asked any question to start a fight. She just loved Jesus and wanted to loved everyone else – two- and four-legged alike – as best as she could. And as soon as Loretta

fired a counter attack on Sam, he knew that this was going to be another round of **faux-Armedgeddon** at the **downtown-church-that-feels-like-the-Battle-of-Gettysburg**.

The general format was always pretty much the same; only, this time, **Loretta**, had skipped over several steps and jumped right into the prooftexting of scripture. So **Sam** retaliated in jumping over the normal number of steps before inviting Rev'd Sternhouse to enter into the fiery furnace to join Meshack, Shadrack, and Abednego.

Funny thing is that Rev'd Sternhouse had just seen this same battle being played out on church signs – at least that's what he had read on the internet:

The sign for ***Our Lady of Martyrs Catholic Church*** read:  
**ALL DOGS GO TO HEAVEN.**

The sign for ***Beulah Presbyterian Church*** was then lettered to read:  
**ONLY HUMANS GO TO HEAVEN. READ THE BIBLE.**

The following week the sign for ***Our Lady of Martyrs Catholic Church*** read:  
**GOD LOVES ALL HIS CREATURES, DOGS INCLUDED.**

The ***Beulah Presbyterian Church*** responded:  
**DOGS DO NOT HAVE SOULS. THIS IS NOT OPEN FOR DEBATE.**

The battle now was on. ***Our Lady of Martyrs Catholic Church*** sign read:  
**CATHOLIC DOGS GO TO HEAVEN. PRESBYTERIAN DOGS TALK TO THEIR PASTOR.**

Uh-oh. Now, it's denominational: The ***Beulah Presbyterian Church*** fired back:  
**CONVERTING TO CATHOLICISM DOES NOT MAGICALLY GRANT YOUR DOG A SOUL.**

***Our Lady of Martyrs Catholic Church*** backed off, to appear pastoral:  
**FREE DOG SOULS WITH CONVERSION.**

The ***Beulah Presbyterian Church*** raised the ante:  
**DOGS ARE ANIMALS. THERE AREN'T ANY ROCKS IN HEAVEN EITHER.**

Like any good circular argument, the ***Our Lady of Martyrs Catholic Church*** sign said:  
**ALL ROCKS GO TO HEAVEN.**

Yes, **Rev'd Sternhouse** knew that – other than sweet Wilma, who adored her Lassie, the *rest of the combatants mostly just cared about their win-loss record.*

And he knew that ***when it gets like this, Jesus was his only hope.*** He needed to call upon Jesus to say something more outlandish than any of their arguments and then they'd forget all about the question with which they had tried to exact a pound of his pastoral flesh.

So, finding his place in scripture, and warbling up his best professorial tone, Rev'd Sternhouse said: **"I think we need to look at what Jesus says about dogs. Don't you?"** And without waiting for a response, he began to read from the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew:

<sup>21</sup>Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. <sup>22</sup>Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, **'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.'**

<sup>23</sup>But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, **'Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.'** <sup>24</sup>He answered, **'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.'**

<sup>25</sup>But she came and knelt before him, saying, **'Lord, help me.'**

<sup>26</sup>He answered, **'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.'**

<sup>27</sup>She said, **'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.'**

<sup>28</sup>Then Jesus answered her, **'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.'** And her daughter was healed instantly.

Then – and this was the key: **KEEPING A PERFECTLY STRAIGHT FACE AND MAINTAINING HIS DEEP ACADEMIC TONE** – Sternhouse concluded: **"I think that pretty much sums it up, don't you? It's always good to hear our Lord shed some light on these difficult issues, don't you think."**

Then, quickly turning on his heel, Rev'd Sternhouse beat a hasty retreat from the room. He had done it! He quoted Jesus saying something so very outrageous – more

outrageous than what they had been arguing about – that it was like a punch to the solar plexis. By the time they were able to re-gather their thoughts and wind, he was gone.

**“You gotta love that Jesus. Just got to! Thank you, Lord,”** was his silent prayer, as his shoes moved as quickly as possible around the corner and into another room, and he shut the door.

The problem was – this time – what Jesus said was SO VERY BOTHERSOME that all three: Wilma, Sam, and Loretta really were in a quandary. This was not the loving Jesus they knew. It wasn't even a Jesus open to Gentiles – thereby making that old curmudgeon Paul seem kinder and gentler than Jesus.

**Sam** didn't trust the preacher, and went and got his own Bible to read it. **“Yep. That's what it said. Did Jesus really treat that woman so badly?”**

**Loretta**, whose feminism was offended, said: **“I'm glad they didn't teach THIS in Sunday School when I was growing up. I can't believe Jesus really said that. Why did that poor woman – who was in sorry enough condition, with her sick daughter and all – why did she take that off him? I'd have let him have it”**

**“No, you wouldn't” Sam** said to **Loretta**. **“There you go, imposing your 21<sup>st</sup> century ideas onto the culture of two millenia ago. She was a woman. She would have known her place. She wouldn't have chewed him out. He was the man. It's just like dogs back then – they weren't house pets. People didn't care for them the way Wilma cares for Lassie. Dogs were Ughy creatures. It really was a slam on her to compare her to a dog, though, I've got to admit.”** Even though it was a culture 2,000 years ago, Sam was really bothered by this.

**“What I like about it,”** ventured **Wilma**, with her first comment since she started the whole Lassie-to-heaven issue way back then, **“is that that dear woman cared so much about her daughter. She didn't try to talk Jesus into why she was qualified to receive Jesus' help. She just wanted help. That's kind of neat that it was her acceptance of her need, not her qualifications, that got her all she asked for.**

**“Maybe that's what faith is all about, after all. Not a set of beliefs, but a recognition of a need. Maybe that's all Jesus was trying to get those other people to understand. [PAUSE] Come to think about it: maybe that's why the story is in the**

**Bible, for us, too. Maybe need to focus on what is OUR NEED FOR JESUS, and not be worried so much about who gets IN and who has to stay OUT.”**

There was SILENCE IN THE ROOM. In all the time they had known her, neither Sam nor Loretta had ever heard Wilma say that much at one time.

Finally Sam broke the silence. “You know, Wilma. Maybe you’re right. And maybe I need to look at some of those scriptures Loretta was talking about. I don’t see how it would hurt anyone if Jesus decided to let Lassie go to heaven with you.”

Silence again.

“But, I want to know who’s going to be responsible for cleaning up that mess that we’ve got down in the basement after last Friday. You know, we’ve got to have some standards around here. ...”

Loretta took up the offensive/defensive since her group had met there on Friday.

**And Wilma – she just smiled ... and scratched Lassie behind her ears.**

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.