

July 7, 2024 sermon for St. Anne's Episcopal Church

*Shaking Off The World's 'Dust'*

By Ken Woodley

There is no record of a dog tagging along with Jesus and the apostles, but I suspect there *was* a beloved canine companion somewhere along the way.

Just as we are blessed by Ranger's presence.

One possible clue—from the Gospel of Matthew—is how immediately Jesus reacts to the Canaanite woman who stands up to him, and pleads for her daughter's healing, by replying that even dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.

Tellingly the Greek translation of the word Jesus used, and the Canaanite woman repeated, specifically means a “small dog” or a “pet dog.” Jesus did not choose the word “dog” that means an unspiritual person or unclean animal.

Jesus had probably shared more than a few crumbs with a doe-eyed tail-wagging pet dog at some point. He was too compassionate not to have done so.

And so I like to believe that the woman's comment took him straight back to the feel of a dog's warm, wet and grateful tongue on the palm of his hand as the crumbs were licked up.

The clearest indication of paw prints on Jesus's heart might be the advice he gives the twelve apostles in today's Gospel lesson before he sends them out to spread the Good News.

"If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you," Jesus tells them, "as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them."

That wise counsel has been acted out by dogs for thousands of years. It is a well-known fact that dogs shake as a coping mechanism to relieve and reduce stress. It's a way they calm themselves down.

That may be where we get the expression, "Shake it off," mostly used in sports after an error or dropped pass. "Shake it off. Next play, go get 'em."

Pugsley, my dear departed four-legged best friend, hated baths. He'd always shake after Kim took him out of the tub, but it wasn't to get dry. It was to calm himself down and get rid of the tension.

Our little pug, who I still miss so deeply, also hated the snow. I always shoveled out part of the front yard for him, but he would still shake vigorously when he got back inside the warm house after doing his business.

So, yes, I believe Jesus had seen more than one dog shake off a difficult experience and knew why it had done so. That physical act sent a calming get-beyond-it message to the dog's brain. It's over and done. Time to move on.

That is the message Jesus wanted the apostles to send themselves.

A focused, intentional and physical way to help rid themselves of the pain and disappointment—the stress—of rejection, an affirming action to keep them from losing heart along the way.

If the rejecting community took it as a sign against their hard-heartedness, fine. But I believe Jesus was thinking more about uplifting the apostles than putting down those who wouldn't listen.

The physical dust in the Gospel of Mark is a symbol of how negative, stressful experiences can cover us with an invisible layer of painful memory, unseen but keenly felt.

There are many times in our lives when we need to shake someone's metaphoric dust off our feet. Big or little moments of rudeness or rejection, or stressful challenges in a tension-filled day.

Even minor irritations can hurt way more than they should—like a splinter left in the skin—if we don't deal with them.

It can be so helpful to follow the advice of Jesus and the example of dogs and find some way to shake that “dust” off our feet.

If we don't, then it comes home with us. It gets all over the rug, covers the furniture. It even gets on the people we live with and love.

The irritation, stress or hurt that we haven't shaken off affects our mood and our mood impacts everyone around us.

It begins to “dust” our soul. And theirs.

The things we don't shake off also distract us from the many ways God is trying to open our hearts to the healing, loving and compassionately-wise presence of the Holy Spirit within us.

There are any number of ways to shake off the world's "dust" but we have to be focused and intentional about it. We tell ourselves, I'm going to do this to shake off the "dust."

Then we say a thoughtful prayer, play a favorite record album or cd, go for a walk, read a treasured passage of scripture, make a bowl of popcorn, share a great big hug with someone we love.

We can even write the word "dust" on a sheet of paper, then ball that piece of paper up and throw it in the trash. I have a friend who received that precise advice from a therapist: Write down what's hurting you, ball it up and throw it away.

Shake it off. Turn the page.

Find whatever works for you and make that be your declaration of independence over the "dust" of the world.

Ring your liberty bell loud and clear. Wag your tail and bark to heaven.

Because God is able to serve us far more than crumbs from the table when we do. Abundant love will fill our plate.

Enough love to share. Enough love for Pugsley. Enough love for Ranger. Enough love for everyone in the world. But we must be careful. The dust of others isn't the only "dust of the world."

There is also our own.

The dust *we* create that could cover others and the love we have to share. In the end, shaking off our own “dust” is the most important thing of all. That is where the revolutionary war of love is first won or lost.