

Metaphor is . . . / . . . love / devising an adequate grammar . . . John Savant

I'm not sure how expansive my father-in-law's musical repertory went; probably not far. He was a sturdy Midwesterner (Missouri) and more given to farm financing than to popular music. But one favorite of his was the familiar: *You are my sunshine, my only sunshine / You make me happy when skies are gray / You'll never know dear how much I love you / Please don't take my sunshine away.* And, knowing my father-in-law, that lyric referred to his wife alone – and no one else.

Of course Sergeant Friday might object: Ellen was neither the sun nor sunshine. She was a woman of a certain height and weight, college educated, of Episcopal Church leanings, five foot two, eyes of blue . . . Just the facts, please. That she could be sunshine defies all science and logic. Of course Sergeant Friday was a detective, dedicated to the literal, trained to suspect any metaphors such as somebody being sunshine.

In today's Gospel reading a Canaanite woman – using straight talk – says she has a daughter tormented by a demon (which in our days could be anything mental or physical or strange). She asks Jesus to come and heal the girl. Jesus does not even have the courtesy to respond. It's only after his Jewish disciples urge him to get rid of her – as an alien and a woman - that he speaks to her. [And here I want to interject my own – up to date - sense of this episode, since such ancient stories are always experientially *new*.]

And so Jesus speaks to the woman – but not with straight talk – like No I won't or what's your address or how far is it to your daughter's location. Rather he launches into a *metaphor*. In other words he *stages* his response. He denies the woman's request by imagining a Jewish dinner party, table, food, drink, kids, household pets, music – and says: *It's not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs.*

By referring to Canaanites as dogs could Jesus subtly intend that for the ears of his disciples – to whom such an insult would sound quite “politically correct”? But by opening up the panorama of an exclusive dinner party, could Jesus also be sending a *cue* to the woman to pick up on his analogy – to take her place on the stage he has set up, in hopes that she will assume a role, ad lib a response? That's exactly what she does! *Please, Lord*, she says, *For even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of their 'betters'.*

*Right on!* says Jesus. *You picked up my cue – we understand each other. We speak the same language; you are at home in metaphor as all my followers must be – poetic. Let it be done as you wish.* And may we not imagine that both Jesus and this alien woman gave each other a wink of mutual understanding – while the disciples over time pondered this episode, eventually to comprehend the universal scope of Christ's Gospel: that *there is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female, for all are one in Christ Jesus?* (Galatians 3:28)

**Geoff Wood**