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“Crumbs from the Table”

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Matthew 15:21-28

Some texts of scripture preachers avoid like the plague. The story of the Canaanite woman from Matthew 15 and its parallel from Mark’s Gospel of the Syrophoenician woman are examples. They are a preacher’s nightmare.

Jesus, the messiah, the one who comes to bring life and healing and salvation, the one brings good news to the poor—this Jesus is caught being insensitive and uncaring to a poor and desperate woman. He is inattentive to her dignity as well as to her plight. To have a troubled young daughter is bad enough; must she get down on her knees and beg as well? Such episodes as this Dr. Tom Long, a teacher of preachers, describes as times when Jesus seems to be caught with his divinity down.

If we can step away from our initial reactions of offense for a moment, I believe the Gospel writer has an extraordinary message to deliver. It is a message about God’s embrace of humanity, all of humanity. People we don’t expect are included; people easily dismissed by others are engaged and welcomed.

The radical message of the Gospel stories is that the ministry of Jesus, which was originally a Jewish religious effort, became much broader and more inclusive. Seeing the remarkable grace that is coming to the Jewish people through Jesus, Gentiles want in on it, they want the new life provided by Jesus. The question is: will that new life be available to a non-Jewish population? Are outsiders to be

included? And the Gospel stories indicate these questions started, not years after the Christian church was spreading throughout the known world, but during the time of Jesus' own ministry.

Within the Synoptic Gospels, irony is often used to convey the irrepressible nature of the Good News coming through Jesus. In the Gospel of Mark, this irony is conveyed through secrets. There is always a finger placed to the lips, saying, "Sshh! Keep it quiet. Don't let anyone know that Jesus is the messiah." In other Gospels it is the obtuseness of the disciples who never seem to understand. Yet the secrets keep being disclosed and proclaimed, and those outside the circle of the disciples "get it."

It is like the reverse psychology parents occasionally use on their young children: "Whatever you do, don't eat that broccoli on your plate." And the child grabs the vegetable and promptly chews it up, giggling at her parents.

I believe that a similar dynamic of irony is at work in this passage as well. What appears dismissive and callous is actually an invitation to attention and inclusion.

When this Gentile woman requests help for her troubled daughter, Jesus explains: "The food belongs to the children, first. I can't give it to the dogs." "Yet even the pups under the table get some of the crumbs," the woman argued. The story portrays Jesus as not ready to throw the door open to the Gentiles. Yet to deny the request would be to limit God's grace, and Jesus' ministry was all about expanding the embrace of God.

This story demonstrates that Jesus would not deny letting the Gentiles in on the blessing. If Jesus wouldn't deny them, how could the church?

The story of this woman is included in a portion of the Gospel where Jesus ministers among a predominantly non-Jewish population. It is often assumed that Jesus had little contact with Gentiles, yet the Gospel accounts portray it otherwise.

This story of "feeding crumbs" to the dogs occurs between two other feeding stories: the feeding of the five thousand where the community gathered is Jewish,

and the feeding of the four thousand where the gathered community is likely Gentile.

In the passage immediately before this story of the Canaanite woman, Jesus had removed the Jewish dietary restrictions upon foods, declaring all foods acceptable to his followers. Could it be that Jesus' ministry to the Gentile woman is evidence that all people are acceptable to God?

After Jesus has ministered to Jews and Gentiles alike, Peter makes his grand declaration of faith: "Who do you say that I am?" "You are the Messiah" (Matthew 16:16). And from that point on, Jesus sets his course to Jerusalem and the cross. It's as though the Gospel writers insist that non-Jews are to be included with the children of Abraham, not as an afterthought, but as the intended plan of God all along.

For the early church, initially comprised primarily of Jews but increasing in numbers of Gentiles, this was a politically volatile assertion. The Jewish faith anticipated including Gentiles at some point in the future. However, it was expected as the culminating fulfillment of that grand promise to Abraham that through him every nation would be blessed.

The prophets' proclamation was that *someday* all nations would gather together in peace at the doorstep of Jerusalem and all would worship God. But no one expected it in the present moment.

That is why the Apostle Paul had to be so careful in the young church. His calling was to proclaim the Gospel to the Gentiles. Yet because of the sensitive nature of this issue, Paul's ministry always followed a specific pattern. Upon entering a new town in the Mediterranean world, Paul went first to the Jewish community to proclaim the Gospel, and then later to the Gentile community. He did this to maintain the fragile peace that existed between Jewish and Gentile Christians.

You know how it is when someone is sensitive about a subject. You carefully construct your sentences, you couch your language in certain ways, you walk on eggshells to not create a reaction.

Given the sensitivity of the early church, the story of this Gentile woman may not be as offensive or demeaning *to her* as it appears. It may be far more offensive to those who wanted to preserve the Christian faith for themselves, for their own community and kin, and to keep the Gentiles out. Jesus, not only including a woman, but a Gentile woman of all things! What is this world coming to?

Well, the world was coming to salvation, and a savior was throwing open the door. Not to a select few, not only those on the inside, but to everyone. It was a controversial message.

The image of crumbs for dogs was a metaphor of inclusion. We still find that image objectionable, don't we?

It may depend on which side of the transaction we are on that determines our view: if we come from the side of plenty, these are merely crumbs. If we come from the side of need and want, these crumbs are life itself.

The cruise ship docks at harbor in the beautiful Caribbean. Native children gather round as the seafaring travelers disembark, hawking their wares, hoping for a sale or a handout. To the tourists, their trinkets are a trifling, the cost next to nothing. It appears that the natives are looking for crumbs. But to the children, it may be a way to help their family survive another day or week.

The refugees who have fled to the mountain for safety from the ISIS forces: bottles of water and packets of food dropped in by airlift—these are not more than crumbs, but for them they bring life.

Jesus Christ—to so many of us who have everything, who have security and investments and a retirement plan and health insurance and a home and friends and family—to so many of us, Jesus Christ and faith in God's grace and new life may appear to be crumbs.

God is a good angle to have when you have nothing—nothing else to fall back upon, nothing else to rely on. For most of us, we can use our considerable arsenal of other resources and strategies to address needs that may arise.

You and I want more than crumbs, don't we?

The story of salvation and redemption is one we don't want to hear. I want my dignity preserved. I want to believe I have done something, that I am something, that I have contributed something. Who wants to be dependent on someone else, who wants to be beholden to another?

The Apostle Paul knew a different reality; he lived with another truth. Paul was very successful, and he talked about his success. Yet he said it was nothing in light of what he had found in Jesus Christ. “Whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as garbage, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him” (Phil. 3:7, 8).

I want more than crumbs.

That is why efforts to help people in the church and outside of the church struggle at times. While everyone intellectually knows we need others and that everyone has crises and challenges in life, it is difficult to admit to another human being that we are needy.

“How are you doing?” “Oh, I'm fine.” “Sorry to hear about your accident and hospitalization....” “It's just a scratch; I'm fine.” “And I understand there was a death in the family....” “Well, when it's your time to go, that's it. I'm doing fine, really. Thanks for asking.”

Such folk don't sound like the Canaanite woman to me. She is pushing and pressing, relentless in her request. She seems to know that all heaven is about to break out, and that Jesus is barely keeping the lid on. She wants in on it, she wants

her family to benefit from it, she won't take no for an answer. If it's crumbs, she'll take crumbs.

The truth is we all need the grace that came to this Gentile woman, as well as to the children of Abraham.

Crumbs. You may believe your life is not much more than crumbs in the big scheme of things. Did you know God's work of creation and redemption is always revealed in crumbs?

In God's economy, it doesn't take much. Jews and Christians have historically claimed that God created the cosmos out of nothing.

The incarnation—God taking human flesh in Jesus. And where did the almighty, the all powerful God come? The creator of the universe to whom all earthly and heavenly powers bow? Into a borrowed cattle trough in a stranger's home. Crumbs.

The life of faith is all about crumbs.

When Jesus talked about faith, he said it didn't have to be big. All you need is the size of a mustard seed, something you have to get out a magnifying glass to see very well, and with that tiny amount, you can move mountains. Crumbs.

Every month we have a feast in worship—the Lord's Supper we call it. You know, it really is a feast of crumbs—broken bits of bread, a thimbleful of juice. You call that a feast? Yet it has fed and nurtured countless communities through the centuries. At that table, people have found strength in the midst of uncertainty, forgiveness in the face of failure, hope in the presence of devastation. Crumbs.

God has this curious way of taking crumbs and making them a source of life and grace.

Did you know that the Jews have a specific law about crumbs? They do! It is about gleaning their harvested fields. After the harvesters had passed through the field

gathering the crop, the Torah instructed them not to re-enter the fields to pick up the leftover grain that may have fallen to the ground or been missed.

The leftovers were for the widow and orphan to gather in a harvest of grace. Crumbs of compassion for those in need. God has a strange interest in crumbs.

The United States has the highest poverty rate of any modern industrialized nation in the world today, and children are particularly involved. The cities of North Carolina that seem to be the most affluent are the ones with the deepest and most hidden pockets of poverty, including Durham.

When you translate statistics into reality, you see stories like the Canaanite woman right here in Durham. More people than ever are looking for crumbs.

How might ministries look for us within this community in the immediate future? Perhaps it could be keeping the doors of faith open for all, doors which our savior has flung wide for everyone. Perhaps ministries of compassion might be to take the crumbs of our circumstances and offer them to a loving and gracious God to bless and make into true life. Perhaps ministries of compassion might be to share the abundance of our own blessing, knowing they are merely crumbs to us, but in God's hands, these crumbs have power.

Crumbs from the table. They nurture and feed. They bring embrace and welcome. They heal and inspire hope.

In God's hands, mustard seeds and too little and crumbs can bring a harvest of life.