

“Crumbs of Faith”

Reading: Isaiah 56:1-8; Matthew 15:21-28

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If the meal is good enough, even the crumbs are a treat. Of course, dogs aren't generally known for being picky, though they certainly can have favorites. My dog absolutely loves broccoli stems; as excited as he gets about them, you'd think it was a filet mignon. Even so, every tiny scrap that falls from the dinner table will get inspected and eaten. But even for humans, if the meal is good enough, even the crumbs are a treat. I once worked in the kitchen of a restaurant that served a very nice Sunday brunch buffet every week, and those of us on staff spent a lot of time the day before preparing for this brunch. It was a lot of work each week, and woe to the staff member who tried to sneak some of the brunch food out of the refrigerator or off the table. However, the staff supper that evening was often one of the best meals of the week; we got the leftovers.

Crumbs, table leavings, and leftovers are at the center of this story from Jesus' life. There are some disturbing elements in this interchange that takes place between Jesus and this unnamed woman. I tend to picture Jesus as being pretty approachable and compassionate. He's certainly no pushover and He's just as certainly not predictable, but when He's confronted with a need you can usually bet He'll do whatever it takes to meet that need with the power of God's kingdom. Jesus could be confrontational to those who needed it, and He was hardly afraid to speak the hard truth, but I for one have a hard time picturing Him as being aloof and standoffish when someone asks for His help. He doesn't seem easily offended by people who transgress the social codes of their day in order to ask for help; as we look through the gospels we see that He's regularly accosted by the kinds of people that get ignored and shunned, but He doesn't ignore them.

But here is a woman with a clear need — her daughter is possessed by demons and is suffering terribly — and at first, Jesus doesn't even give her the courtesy of a polite rejection. It's bad enough when you receive a form letter that says something like, “We're sorry, but your application did not meet our standards,” but that's at least better than *nothing*. Being worth a standard rejection is better than not even being worth the effort of a rejection. Jesus doesn't even say a word to her.

Again, the problem here is not that she's being pushy or overbearing; Jesus regularly dealt with people who stepped out of their place and asked for His mercy. The problem is not that she's a woman in a patriarchal culture, breaking the taboo of a woman addressing a respected rabbi; Jesus often elevated women above the status given to them by society and didn't hesitate to respond to their cries for mercy. It's not a problem of the woman being too sinful, because Jesus heals and delivers and responds to many other people with far more obviously sinful lives. And it's certainly not a problem of Jesus being unable to deliver this woman's daughter; He's already performed far greater displays of God's power.

No, the problem is something much harder for our modern minds to grasp. Though our culture still obviously struggles with class and ethnic divisions separating those who are in from those who are out, we have a society where at least in theory everyone has the same rights. The thought of withholding compassion from a person in need, especially when the ability to help her is right there, simply because of her ethnicity, doesn't compute for us today. But Matthew's gospel makes it clear that this woman is a Canaanite, and Mark's gospel refers to her as a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia.

The point is that she's not an Israelite and she's not a Jew. The buffet has been prepared, and there's plenty of good food, but it wasn't prepared for her.

We have to remember that in ages past God had made a covenant specifically with the descendants of a man named Abraham. Abraham trusted God, and that quality of trust so set him apart that God decided to save all of creation beginning with this one man and his family. God decided to bless Abraham, and through Abraham, God would bless the whole world. The idea was to begin the process of beginning a new creation that was faithful to God right in the midst of the old creation that had rejected Him, so He began by making a covenant with this one family of people.

Jesus is therefore being faithful to that covenant made so many generations before. In Jesus, God became flesh and dwelt among us, and He came to lead us back out of the darkness by beginning with that one family of Israel. The message of repentance came to them first because they were the ones God had been working so closely with for so long. God had made promises to them that He was now fulfilling through the work of Jesus. And so Jesus sees His mission as announcing that the kingdom of God has arrived, but He's making that announcement to the people who are, in theory, the most prepared to hear it, the ones who have been promised that when the kingdom comes, they will be the ones to see it first. Throughout the gospels, Jesus almost never strays from the land of Israel. This is one time when He gets pretty close to the border, and there were a couple of other times, but He almost exclusively preaches and teaches among Jews because God was being faithful to the promises He has already made.

So He says nothing in response to this woman's pleas. She's persistent, though, to the point that Jesus' disciples think that something needs to be done. Jesus gives her a response that is hard to interpret. Is He being dismissive, or is He being playful? Is this snark or wit? "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs," He says, with the implication being that the Israelites are the children and Gentiles are the dogs. The banquet is for those who have been invited to the table, in other words. We know from other stories that Jesus often had insight into the hearts of the people He encountered, so maybe He said this to this woman because He knew how she would respond; we can't know. But she shows a remarkable clear-headedness in the heat of the moment, and she matches Jesus' wit with more wit: "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

I can only picture Jesus laughing in surprise at her response. Whether He knew what she was going to say or not, He didn't think she was being impertinent. He praises her faith and heals her daughter. And it becomes clear that what opens the door for the power of the kingdom of God is this quality of great faith, not ethnicity or anything else. It is this persistent trust that Jesus is the Messiah, that the kingdom of God arrives with Him and is revealed through Him, that allows a person to enter into that kingdom.

What makes this episode especially powerful is what came just before it. In the first half of this chapter, Jesus has just been involved in a dispute with the religious elite, the people who have all the answers and follow all the rules. They're upset because they see Jesus and His disciples eating without washing their hands, which broke some of their food purity laws. Jesus comes back at them and calls them hypocrites, because they would rather follow the letter of their traditions than the genuine call of God's law. Purity is a matter of what comes out of your heart, not what food you put into you, He

says. These legalists are “blind guides,” He says, and “every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots.”

And so we have a group of super-religious folks who are the first ones invited to the table but reject the food given to them, and we have a “dog” under the table who is content with only the crumbs. The great faith of this non-Jewish woman is shown to be that much greater because of the lack of faith of the people who thought they knew everything about the kingdom of God. The last people anyone would expect to embrace Jesus as their Lord are doing so far ahead of the people who should be first in line, because the ones at the head of the line are rejecting Him.

What this suggests to us is one of the great refrains of the Bible: “The righteous will live by faith.” Your family ties and your skin color and your gender and your past and your religious knowledge and all those other things count for diddly-squat when it comes to entering the kingdom of God. If you have faith that Jesus Christ is Lord, you are welcome to encounter the power of His kingdom. That is the only requirement. If you reject Him as Lord, you will not see His kingdom, no matter what other qualifications you may tout. This woman was so far outside of God’s covenant that at first, even Jesus ignored her. But she trusted that He is Lord, and the power of God saved her daughter. The religious teachers had the right bloodlines and extensive knowledge, not to mention a lifetime surely lived in ritual purity, but they did not trust Jesus, and Jesus called them blind guides.

This was always the plan. God started with this one family, but the intent was always to save the whole of creation and bring all nations into His family. We read a beautiful passage from the prophet Isaiah, coming in the middle of a promise to the scattered exiles of Israel that God would gather His people back together in safety and bounty. But the promise isn’t just for those with the right pedigree, the promise is also for the imperfect, the foreigners, the ones who have spent their whole lives so far away from God’s promise. “I will gather still others to them besides those already gathered,” the Lord says.

We have a problem in our world of walls and divisions being built between those who are in and those who are out. This is a very divided time. Nations are fighting nations, factions are vying for power, communities are struggling to be heard, people live in fear and distrust. What is there for us to do? What can we in Pocono Lake do for Ferguson, Missouri, or Syria, or Iraq, or Israel and Gaza, or Ukraine? What can we do for the political divide in our nation that keeps getting deeper? What can we do in our own community, for the families that are fractured and the unseen people who are hurting? What can we do for our own souls, when we are lost and guilty and stained? What can we do to break down those dividing walls?

If you have faith that Jesus Christ is Lord, you are welcome to encounter the power of His kingdom. Anyone who puts their trust in Him can see the power of God at work. The greatest work of healing and reconciliation and forgiveness that we can offer is to proclaim the good news, and to open our arms in invitation to those who are cast out, to tell them that they are not too far from God to see His kingdom revealed and enter into it. It is open to all who will come, no matter what. And if we truly do this work, if we turn the crumbs into a meal, if we invite the “dogs” to dinner, we put on display the power of God. No one else can break down the walls of hostility and separation and sin the way God can. No family other than the church can unite people who have nothing in common but

Christ. In our invitation to unity, we show the world that there is another way, that the kingdom of God has arrived, that it is powerful, and it removes the need for fear, hatred, and violence.

But there is more. Faith is enough to see the power of the kingdom revealed, but there is more to the kingdom. Faith gets you in the gate, but there is more to explore. It gets you to the table, but it doesn't get you all the way to dessert. This woman's great faith was enough to get her daughter healed, but it was not enough for her to see the fullness of the kingdom of God. And so as we invite others to come to faith in Christ, we also invite them to know the holiness of the kingdom of God. If we trust Jesus, we trust His work in our lives, and His work produces the fruit of transformation. We are united in the name of Christ and we grow together into the image of Christ. This, too, demonstrates to the world that the kingdom is here and is active: if we put in action holiness and love, we show a different sort of life.

Today we invite a response of prayer for one person you know and have contact with who does not yet have a church home. Coming to church is not faith in Christ, but it is an invitation to join the community. Commit to pray for that person now and in coming weeks, that they might be receptive to God's call to them.

Benediction: Go out into a world that is suffering terribly. Go in the name of Christ to share great faith and bring the mercy of God wherever you go.



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