

“Crumbs from the Table”

Introduction: I wonder, as you sit here this morning, who you would be overjoyed to see walking into this sanctuary next Sunday morning? A family member or neighbor you’ve been praying for? A co-worker you’ve been having spiritual conversations with? A student in your classroom or a teacher from your school? My hunch is that if any of these folks joined us in worship that you’d welcome them with great enthusiasm.

Now let me also ask, who might you be dismayed to see walk into this room next week?! A student or teacher at your school who has made your life miserable? An out-spoken person from the opposite political party from yours? A boss who passed you over for a promotion, or a neighbor who has vehemently opposed you in a town issue? My hunch is that if you were honest, you would not really want to these kinds of people in the pew next to you.

The fact of the matter is that as we seek to bring the good news about Jesus in word and deed to others, we might very well have people walk in the doors of our church who we would like to see go away. In this morning’s text, we meet a woman who the disciples of Jesus wanted to see go away. Jesus, though silent at first, and when he does talk he sounds surprisingly uncompassionate, wants to teach his followers that the doors to the Kingdom of God are to be open just a bit wider than we’d perhaps, if we are honest with ourselves, like to see.

Though at first blush, this encounter might not seem to fit in with our “around the table” sermon series, in which we’ve been looking at what we can learn from the meals Jesus shared with others, this woman seems to have the image of a meal, and a table, in mind as she talks about the love and compassion of Jesus that she hopes she can receive.

I. An Interrupted Retreat

A. As we begin to think about this, the setting is significant. Jesus, Matthew tells us, has left the region of Galilee, and has moved further north to the area around the cities of Tyre and Sidon. This is Gentile, that is pagan, non-Jewish, territory. Jesus has been dogged, and opposed at every turn, by the Jewish religious leaders and it seems as if he wanted to get away for a few days, to spend some time on retreat with his disciples, as he does from time to time. Tyre and Sidon were on the coast, always a nice place to go when on retreat, and it was likely the Jews would not follow him and pester him there.

B. But Jesus was interrupted anyway, by a Canaanite woman who lived in the area. She was desperate. Her daughter was suffering terribly, possessed by a demon, we read. As I’m sure you’ve experienced, there is nothing that makes a parent more desperate or leaves them feeling more helpless than when a child is not well. Demon-possession would just up the anxiety it seems to me! We don’t know how she found Jesus, but it is interesting that she is there because just a few miles away was a temple to the pagan god of healing, named Eshmun. Why didn’t she go there? Maybe she did but to no avail. Not only does she find Jesus and come to him, but she addresses him this way: “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Son of David is a Jewish, messianic title. Further, she knows her need for his mercy, that it is only by his grace that any remedy for her daughter might be found. How she came to know this we can’t be sure. Certainly, news of what Jesus had been up to in Galilee, and who he was claiming to be, had begun to travel. She was the end of her rope, a place Jesus so often meets us.

II. A Teachable Moment

A. But not this time, it seems. In response to a desperate pagan woman, who seems to know who he is better than most Jews, and whose daughter has been taken over by the forces of evil, Jesus seems to have nothing to say. What's up with that?! His disciples, it turns out, have plenty to say. When Jesus remains quiet, they come to him and urge him to send her away. "She's bothering us," they complain, which is interesting because it's Jesus she is crying out to. Evidently, she's not their type. As a Canaanite, she is actually a descendant of Israel's most bitter enemy, the ones who fought against the Israelites as Joshua led them into the Promised Land. They also fought the Israelites spiritually, seeking to lead them away into idolatry. Jews wanted nothing to do with this woman, or her people.

Illustration: I am reminded of my father-in-law, a Dutchman, who grew up in Indonesia which was invaded by the Japanese during WWII. So, as a young boy, from the age of 8-12, Willem lived in a Japanese prisoner of war camp. He doesn't talk about it much. No doubt it was horrible. If he didn't catch enough flies, he wouldn't be given any food. To this day, whenever he hears Japanese spoken, like when he's walking through a shopping mall, he shudders. He wants nothing to do with that race of people.

The disciples thought this kind of thinking was ok, that Jesus even preferred it. Their mission, so they understood Jesus to have been teaching them, was not to the Gentiles, but to the "lost sheep of Israel" (Ma 10:5). When Jesus finally did speak, this seems to have been what was on his mind as well: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." When she persists, he goes one step further, using the derogatory term "dogs," that Jews used for Gentiles, to describe her, to indicate that she wasn't the right kind of person to receive his help, to benefit from the blessing God had planned for his children, the Jews!!

B. So, what's up with this silence of Jesus? Even more, what's up with his seemingly cold and condemning response?! It seems to be so unlike the compassion we see and hear everywhere else from Jesus. Well, there are several theories, many of which conclude that this was a teachable moment . . . for Jesus. They reason that his silence means that he was caught by surprise, or wrestling with what to do, or struggling with his calling. To be sure, Jesus knew that God's new life was to come through Israel, God's chosen people. It's why he was known as the Son of David, a descendant of Israel's greatest king. It's also why they, the promise-bearers, needed to hear first that the promise was being fulfilled, in Jesus.

C. But, while Jesus certainly "grew in wisdom and stature" (Lk. 2:52) into adulthood, by the time his public ministry began, after being baptized with the Holy Spirit and tested in the wilderness, he had a clear idea what his mission was about and about who would be included. Right off the bat, in fact, he began preaching and teaching in his hometown of Nazareth and there pointed out that God's grace had been extended to a widow in Sidon, and a man named Naaman in Syria (both Gentiles (Lk. 4:24-27), seemingly pointing to what God was going to do again. It would have been in fulfillment of God's promise in Genesis 12:1-3 that blessing would come through Abraham's descendants to all nations, a text Jesus would undoubtedly have learned while growing up. And Jesus has already healed the son of a Gentile centurion (Ma. 8:5-13), commending this man's faith as greater than anyone among the Jews.

D. Worth noting is that in other places where we hear silence from Jesus, such as the woman caught in adultery, or at his trial (John 8:1-11; Ma. 27:14), we see Jesus clearly in control of the situation. Could it be that the teachable moment wasn't for Jesus, but for his disciples, and thereafter, for the

church? Could it be that he knew he needed to teach his followers about the Gentile mission and was considering if this might not be a good time to begin? What, then, of his harsh words? Well, could it be that through his words, Jesus was holding up a mirror that reflected what was in the hearts of his disciples? He had just come on this retreat after a lengthy discussion with the Pharisees and teachers of the law about ritual purity. Jesus was driving the point home that it's not what goes into our mouths that makes us unclean, it's not the food we eat or failing to wash our hands before we eat, rather, it's the evil thoughts that come out of our heart that make us unclean (15:1-20). His disciples had heard this discussion and now was time to focus on their own hearts.

Illustration: Think of it this way. Have you ever, those of you who are parents, heard your kids say something that sounds just awful, but you find out they've gotten that idea from listening to you?! Maybe your kid said something like, "Oh those people of color, they're just poor because they're lazy." Horrified, you might ask them where they got that idea and they respond, "from listening to you and mom talk while watching the news." Ouch!! It certainly brings you up short.

Could it be that this is what Jesus is doing? Could it be that he's giving voice to the suspicion and hatred and fear he knows is in his disciples' hearts so that they can hear how ugly and narrow-minded, and void of compassion it sounds? Certainly, we heard it that way. By doing so, could he be seeking to pry open the hearts of his disciples so that they can see that excluding someone from the grace and kingdom of God simply based on how different they are from you, or where they come from, or what their skin color is, is a despicable thing?

III. The Expansive Kingdom and Mission

A. Jesus went on to heal this woman's daughter, in response to her amazing persistence that even though she was understood by others to be a Gentile "dog," she was still a part of God's promised blessing, still able to receive crumbs from his table. She seemed to understand the way God's choice of Israel to be his promise-bearing people for the sake of the world was to work out in practice. It was to include her! And Jesus commended her for her great faith, and probably for helping to tweak his disciples' hearts as well. Then, as if to accentuate this mission to the Gentiles, Jesus then went on to an area of the Sea of Galilee that was Gentile in composition (cf. v. 31; Mk. 7:31), and in the feeding of the 4,000, did the same thing for them that he did for the multitude of five thousand Jews: He healed them and he miraculously fed them with the bread of heaven, demonstrating that they were included within the blessing and grace and kingdom of God. God's blessing begins with Israel, to be sure. But it is to expand to that which is not Israel, to that which is very different from Israel, to the nations.

B. This isn't something Jesus had to learn; it's not something the Father needed to correct in the Son. Rather, it's something the Son needed to teach his followers, it was something he needed to correct in them, then and now. The early church, which was made up primarily of Jewish converts in its early years, struggled for decades with the inclusion of the Gentiles. Certainly, they, as are we all, called to turn from our pagan ways, but in response to God's amazing grace, not to somehow earn or merit it. Maybe Paul had this episode with the Canaanite woman in mind as sought to help the Galatian church work through the issue:

There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ Jesus, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise, [Gal. 3:28-29]

Do we believe that? Who would you be pleased to see come in those doors? Who would you not? If not, why not? Might it be because they are very different from you? Might it be because you don't think them worthy? Might it be because they have wronged or offended you in some way? What might Jesus say, to them? What might he say, to you?