

Table Scraps of Hope

A Sermon Preached by the
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Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32
Matthew 15:21-28

I once heard a pastor say that he doesn't preach on any text that he doesn't understand. When I realized he was serious, I thought to myself, well, if that's true, none of us would preach at all, especially scripture texts like the one that I just read. I sometimes wonder why this story is included in the Gospels in the first place? It's certainly not Jesus' finest moment. The disciples come off as arrogant and kind of whiny, saying, "send her away, she keeps shouting after us," even though there's no indication that she's come anywhere near them. And it's embarrassing for the woman to have to keep begging, loudly, for Jesus' attention. I would venture to say that if this were the only story we had about Jesus, we probably wouldn't count ourselves among his followers, because how are we to understand stories like this one? How are we to relate them to our own lives? Why are we given this glimpse of a Jesus that seems so diametrically opposed to everything else we understand about him?

Of course, it always helps to remember that we're not living in first century Palestine, that we don't share the cultural and social mores of that time and place. So let's back up a bit and begin to put this story in context. Jesus and the disciples have been in Gennesaret, feeding 5000 people, teaching, and walking on water. Just before this account of the Canaanite woman, the Pharisees have come from Jerusalem to engage Jesus in a debate about purity laws, a topic that seems to be on their minds most of the time. They start by asking, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat." And Jesus says, "Why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?" and then goes on to call them hypocrites, saying, "Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles. . . . what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile."

That might be debatable for us; I have to admit that the mother in me hopes that he then took the disciples aside and reminded them to wash their hands before eating.

Anyway, after that encounter, Jesus and his disciples move on to the district of Tyre and Sidon. It's important that those cities are named in this story – they're Gentile territory, where the non-believers live, and it indicates that Jesus

is away from the safety of home, not to mention the purity laws that keep life clean and godly, so he's vulnerable to some trouble.

And here it comes. Here comes trouble in the form of a Canaanite woman from that region. Here's the thing about bringing in the Canaanites: it recalls history, since there were no Canaanites living in the first century; and it therefore evokes memories of the conflict with the Canaanites. Perhaps most importantly, it defines this woman in terms of age-old prejudices. In Mark's account of the incident, she is described as a Syro-Phoenician" woman, which is bad enough, but "The term Canaanite conveys deep-seated historical biases that Syro-Phoenician does not."¹

Then, of course, she's a woman, which somehow always makes it worse, and as one writer puts it, "she's a screamer." That same commentator goes on to ask the question that was probably on everybody's mind at that moment, "What do you do with a pushy Canaanite woman who won't shut up?"²

Well, if you're Jesus, you just ignore her, which couldn't have been easy to do since she was flinging herself at his feet and continuing to beg for mercy and to shout about her demon-possessed daughter. Or if you're among the disciples, you urge Jesus to get rid of her, because she was making everybody uncomfortable.

Jesus makes a pretty lame attempt at getting her out of the way by saying, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." In other words, "I'm not here for you, lady. Don't you get it? You're so far out of the club, you don't count for anything."

Now "a kneeling woman does not have far to fall, and by all rights that insult should have floored her on the spot. After all, what is a desperate Canaanite to do after such a slap but slink off into the crowd, take her place in the filthy streets among the dogs where she belongs, and go back to the daughter still in a demon's grip?"³

Well, not this woman, not she-who-will-not-be-ignored. She's kind of a first-century Betty Friedan. And if you don't know who Betty Friedan was, think about all of the women of my generation who finally found our voices – but not before we were called aggressive, strident, militant, pushy, not unlike the Canaanite woman! So here is a woman perceived by everyone around her to be strident, loud, pushy; a woman who clearly doesn't know her place, a woman who has nothing to lose, demanding to be heard.

And here's where it starts to get interesting. She cries, "Lord, help me." Remember when I told you what the writer Anne Lamott says: there are only two prayers, "Help me, help me, help me. And thank you, thank you, thank you." This falls into the first category, "Lord, help me." But notice that she calls him "Lord," not once but three times. She calls him Son of David, so she knows something about Judaism, she knows who he is said to be, and is deeply respectful in spite of her unconventional methods of getting attention.

¹ Marilyn Salmon, Commentary on the Gospel, www.workingpreacher.org

² Peter S. Hawkins, "Dogging Jesus," *Christian Century*, August 9, 2005, p. 18.

³ Ibid.

So Jesus tries one more time to make her understand that she's not part of the in-crowd. He says, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Being the dog, you need get out of here and leave us alone. The Canaanite woman replies, "Fine, you can call me a dog. I didn't ask to sit at the table, but even the dogs under the table get the table scraps."

And then, as you know, the most astonishing thing happens. Jesus does a complete one-eighty. Maybe he was impressed with her persistence, maybe he was tired of dealing with her. Maybe he remembered what he had just told the Pharisees and his disciples – who were standing right there, don't forget – "it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles." Maybe he realized what had just come out of his own mouth.

Whatever it was, we see a very different side of Jesus. It's not that we haven't seen Jesus behaving in very normal, human ways. Throughout the Gospels, we begin to know a man who behaves much like we do. He gets tired of being followed around by hordes of people, he goes off to be alone, he's hungry and thirsty, he enjoys a good time, he loves his friends. Not infrequently, his emotions boil over in anger at the Pharisees, the money-changers, and even his own disciples. He turns over tables in the temple and says things that sound harsh to our ears, like, "let the dead bury their own dead." And he grieves deeply for those he loves, like his dear friend Lazarus and his cousin John.

But this is unlike any of those other occasions. This time Jesus becomes someone different. He changes his mind, perhaps because he hears himself or sees himself behaving in a way that he wouldn't tolerate in others. Even given the fact that Jesus is a first-century Jewish man, with all of the religious and cultural baggage that comes along with that, he still defies much of that, maybe even all of that, in his interactions with people. He eats with tax collectors and sinners, he engages women in conversation and debate, he touches the untouchables and heals the outcast, the lowest and most despised in society, he shows us how we are to be in relationship with each other. That's why this encounter with the Canaanite woman seems so out of character for him, and why it makes us so uncomfortable.

Maybe it's also because we see ourselves mirrored in his attitude toward the Canaanite woman, and it's not our best selves, it's not our good side, the side we present to the world. It's the side of ourselves that we don't much like to admit that we have. It's the side of us that averts our eyes from the sad and bedraggled woman standing at the freeway exit begging for a handout. It's the side of us that automatically locks the car doors when we see a group of young African American or Latino men standing on the corner. It's the side of us that makes jokes about gay or lesbian people, or rude remarks about women, or thoughtless remarks about those who are mentally or physically disabled.

It's the side of us that defines the "other" by race, nationality, class, sexual orientation, or other deeply ingrained prejudices that go back generations, that we may not even be consciously aware that we carry. It's the side of us that thinks table scraps are good enough for "those people" – whoever "those people" are to us. And it is so subtle that we probably don't even think about it anymore,

much less acknowledge it in ourselves, because we have stopped seeing it, because we think of ourselves as free from those biases, those prejudices.

Until the Canaanite woman gets right in our faces and starts yelling at us and we look away. These days she comes along as the mother of an autistic child whose behavior in church is unacceptable. She shows up as the openly gay man whose ordination is called into question, even though his call to ministry is unquestionable. She's the war veteran – and you can pick just about any war – whose psychological pain is as deep as his physical pain and there are not enough services in the health care system to help him. She is the angry and defiant teenager who struggles in school, who has no support at home, who finds acceptance and power in a gang. I don't need to go on and on. We all know who she is and where she is in our lives.

And we all know that the table scraps aren't adequate to end the hunger for acceptance or the pain of being marginalized.

By the grace of God, that's not the end of the story. Jesus turns around, sees the Canaanite woman at his feet and says, "Woman, great is your faith. Let it be done for you as you wish." By the grace of God, that's not the end of our story either. Like Jesus, we turn around, we see the pain and suffering in front of us, we hear the pleas for help, and we know we can do something about it. That's when our best selves come into focus, and it's always a life-changing moment, as it was for Jesus.

And as it was for the Canaanite woman, whose daughter was healed and whose hope was restored. None of us has the healing power of Jesus, but all of us have the power to offer hope. Sometimes even the smallest act, the most insignificant gesture, opens the door just enough for hope to get in. And when that happens, we know that Jesus turned around, and so we do too.

The table scraps aren't enough. Jesus recognized that the table was to be extended to the non-believers, those who didn't abide by the purity laws, or the expectations of society. And by turning around, Jesus reminds us that everybody is welcome at the table, and everybody eats until they are full of hope. By God's grace, may it always be so. Amen.