

“Leftovers, Scraps and Crumbs”

11th Sunday after Pentecost (Pr 15) – August 16, 2020 – Matthew 15:21-28/A

One of the good things happening since March is that many of us are preparing meals and eating at home more often. In my house, that means we have bits and pieces of a few dinners, and the refrigerator buffet offers a variety of possibilities, so, on “everyone for themselves” nights, I create my own personal smorgasbord, making a plate with a scrap of this, a crumb of that and a rainbow of leftovers. Leftovers, scraps and crumbs that back in February remained uneaten and went into the trash, are now staples of my dinner creations.

Today’s Gospel story is sort of like those plates of differing tidbits: there are many themes to focus on - crumbs to symbolize hunger, and the rising levels of disease and starvation that have been proofed by the leaven of a global pandemic. Maybe a scrap of “nevertheless, she persisted...” a symbol for this week’s historic inclusion of a racially diverse woman on the ticket for Vice President of the United States, and an illustration of strong women with courage and determination. And surely, there is a leftover called racism, as we share details of a Jewish rabbi’s judgmental encounter with a woman not of his faith. A Canaanite. A Gentile. One who did not belong to God’s Chosen People.

You can decide which leftovers, scraps and crumbs on this plate you might choose to consume, while noting that the point of good stories is that they can address any age. Matthew wrote almost 60 years after Jesus had gone. He served a later crowd, wanting to highlight how times had changed since Jesus, and how communities of the early church were now *embracing* Gentiles (**non-Jews**). It was important for Matthew to tell stories about how the changes happened, how Jesus crossed borders to go where no Jew would have wanted to go, and how he had encountered there a Gentile woman who helped him see more of the future that God was calling him to: a future of changing times and changing minds.

Jesus was having One of Those Days. In fact, thus far his ministry has not gone well at all. He had tried to teach and been rejected in his hometown synagogue at Nazareth; he’d been questioned by the religious leaders from the Temple, he’d miraculously healed and fed thousands... With all that, he was not accepted by his own. Lots of ministry had been done, but not much “success.” Even his closest colleagues just weren’t getting it. So, Jesus takes a break, and heads off to another land. North. Beyond the Galilee to Syro-Phoenicia. But *why would he go there, to Gentile territory, to foreign soil, cross into enemy land?*

Well, haven’t you ever wanted to get away to someplace and be anonymous? To go somewhere where nobody knows who you are? But wouldn’t you know it - on the edge of crowds that seemed to gather wherever Jesus went - he runs into This. Obnoxious. Woman. She trails after him shouting – like the worst panhandler that steps in your path and makes you uncomfortable; or the most annoying relative who is always asking for something that you are unable to give. **But**. This woman seems to know Jesus. She calls out for *mercy* using the title reserved for the Messiah, “*Son of David*.” And though she is an **enemy** woman, she begs with a desperation that is universally known by every parent who fears for their child. She cried out. (And here is one of the saddest lines in the Gospels), **but (Jesus) did not answer her at all.**

What?! Like other women in the Gospels, she already has three strikes against her. She is a woman. She is a Canaanite/Gentile, and as such she has no business approaching a Jewish man in public. She is beyond her place, and she is crying out for aid for her daughter, a demon-possessed girl-child, worth less than nothing. She is making a spectacle of herself, unsettling the disciples so much that they ask Jesus to make her go away. He replies (to them, and perhaps to remind himself to stay on task,) “*I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.*”

Jesus knows his place. She knows her place. She knows who Jesus is. She knows she needs only a few crumbs from him – or just to touch the fringe on his garment. She knows who he is and what he can do. But it is not until she comes in faith and humbly kneels at Jesus' feet, looks him in the face and says, "*Lord, help me,*" that Jesus must respond to her directly. How will he react, this one so often "moved to compassion?" Why, just last week, Jesus quickly reached out his hand to lift Peter from the tempestuous waves, lest he drown. Is it possible that God could be using a Gentile woman to reach out, remind Jesus to trust God's guiding?

Change is hard. Jesus compares her to a dog. She absorbs the slur and turns it around to challenge him to do what he has come to do: Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, lift up the lowly and proclaim God's love. For even dogs receive tiny bits of food dropped from the Master's table. *So, what is it that brings a silent God around?*

Was it her persistence? No, she only asked once. Was it her humility? She was probably pretty used to receiving "leftovers." Was Jesus moved to recall manna from heaven, or more recently, images of 12 baskets *full* of crumbs, leftovers from feeding more than 5000 with just a few loaves and fish. But what was it that changed his mind?

Let's **Stop right there.** Watch carefully for what happens next. Listen for the turning point in Jesus' ministry: He has all but ignored her, and yet he seems almost apologetic for not responding to her. The power in the story is that she brought absolutely nothing to the table, except that she needed him. She had nowhere else to go, no one else who could help. Jesus was simply moved by her need. And what do we learn from this encounter? God hurts when we hurt.

I have a rabbi friend who told me once that any Jew can tell you that the heart of God, the reason for God, the gift of God is comfort. When I imagine this story, I wonder if Jesus discovered that he could comfort on that day. I wonder if he might have knelt down to come face to face with her, as we would lower ourselves to speak to a child. (Was her daughter with her?) *So, what is it that brings a silent God around?* The Scripture says clearly it was her **faith** – her deep abiding trust that he was who they said he was – who she believed him to be. Moved by her faith and her need, Jesus sees *something new* about the work he is being called to do. And New Life sweeps in, to comfort woman and child.

As we grow older, we are supposed to learn from our experiences, and we find ourselves agreeing with James Finley who said, "*God has become **much less clear, but much more true.*** On this particular day, Jesus learned to practice what he preached.

But how in the world did a Gentile woman from Tyre and Sidon come to believe in Jesus, a Jewish rabbi from Nazareth? Is it possible that she could she have been in the crowd of 5000? Did she receive from the 12 baskets of crumbs? Might she have been one who took those crumbs of faith and became yeast for the Christian community that flourished a few years later in Antioch, just a few miles down the road from this encounter, and the place where Matthew probably wrote his gospel? It's possible that this woman, her daughter and other Gentiles who believed in Jesus had been telling the story in the area for decades before the apostle Paul arrived in their midst. And I also like to think that this Canaanite woman - who shared some crumbs of her faith with Jesus – both touched his heart and changed his mission.

There are always crumbs to share: \$5 to a panhandler. Writing a letter to a prisoner or signing a petition. Making a donation to the Navajo Nation, not knowing a single indigenous person. Opening a long-closed door just a tiny bit wider... there are always a few scraps available. Yes, we *human beings are only small and insignificant*, (like crumbs?) but we are capable of doing wonders. And nowadays, mercy and justice will cost us more than leftovers if we want to get where God is pointing, and not just return to where we have been. Oh, we will resist change, *but*

the gift and the calling of God is irrevocable, and almost as insistent as a Gentile woman who would not leave Jesus alone. Amen.

Pastor Susan Langhauser
Advent Lutheran Church, Olathe, KS

Resources: *The Contemplative Heart*, James Finlay; J.M. Farro blog; Barbara Brown Taylor, *Seeds of Heaven*; Steven Charleston, Blog on Facebook