

Gathering the Crumbs of Faith

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St. Andrew's Episcopal Church

The parish Stephanie and I attended in Princeton was a bright, open airy 1960's construction. The beams and the pews were made of laminate wood, stained lightly. It was a collection of hard angles and gentle curves. And a row of windows shot up behind the altar, revealing a canopy of trees behind.

It was less traditional than this space we're in, actually. And yet, every year during Lent, we would use the prayers from Rite I in the Book of Common Prayer. These are the most traditional sounding prayers. We never use them here — so only those of you that are familiar with them from another Episcopal Church even know what I'm talking about. For the rest of you, there's a bunch of thees and thous and verbs that endeth in -eth.

There's also this one prayer, said right before the congregation says Holy Communion, known as the Prayer of Humble Access. In it, the congregation prays, "We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs underneath Thy table." It's a prayer that acknowledges, immediately before we come up to the altar rail and receive Holy Communion, that we really are not worthy, of ourselves, to encounter our Lord Jesus like this.

And that line from the prayer, "We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs underneath Thy table" is inspired by the line from today's gospel reading, in which the woman says to Jesus' - "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

So we were saying that prayer, in this church in Princeton, even though that prayer sounds like a cathedral prayer and not like a 1960s church prayer, anyway, we were saying it. And just across the aisle from me, and a row or two forward, there was this couple that was visiting our church for the first time that Sunday. And when the congregation prayed that line, they put down their prayer book, and left the building.

Now maybe, it's possible, the husband suddenly developed a very urgent situation of diarrhea or something. I don't know; but reading their body language and timing, it didn't look like acute onset diarrhea. It seemed like those words were just incompatible with who they saw themselves to be, and what they thought they were doing in worship. And it broke my heart — obviously, it's stuck with me 8 or 9

years. Using a prompt based on this situation, I've made candidates for ordination, including poor Pam here, write me long essays, which I grade very harshly, about Biblical anthropology.

And I do that because this moment broke my heart. Because that prayer, and more importantly this passage, contains great, great good news. You may be wondering though, how can being called a dog (as the woman was, by implication); or calling oneself a dog (as we do in the prayer), how can that be good news? That's what I want to show you this morning.

This passage is about the basis on which a person can access the grace and power of Jesus Christ. How do you get to God?

There's a woman in this story; unnamed. Her daughter has a demon, and she wants Jesus to act in her life. She wants access to his grace and power, to cast out the demon, to restore her daughter.

This woman is not an Israelite, or even a Samaritan. She is a Canaanite, religiously and ethnically different, an outsider — she is not a part of God's chosen people.

But she comes to Jesus anyway — he's actually traveling outside of Jewish territory, so he's in her space, so to speak — and she addresses him, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David, my daughter is tormented by a demon."

Jesus doesn't respond; she keeps shouting, and the disciples get annoyed. They say, "Tell her to get lost."

Jesus says by way of an answer, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." The woman being Canaanite is not one of the lost sheep of Israel. She's out of scope. She is demographically ineligible, unworthy.

Did you know that at most food pantries, any client must show proof of residency? They have to live within certain predetermined zip codes. This has to do with regulations from the North Texas Food Bank, and there are good reasons for it. But it can create this rather perverse situation in which the food bank volunteer is stuck telling the client whose ID doesn't have the right zip code — "This food was sent only for hungry sheep of 75243." (As an aside: This Little Free Pantry idea that Kim Sanchez runs, and several of the women of our church make happen each week, this is really rather radical: if you're hungry, you can just go to the pantry and get food.)

So Jesus was like the food pantry volunteer saying "No soup for you." "I'm the Messiah for Israel, my works of power are for Israel."

To which the woman, kneeling before him, replied, "Lord, help me."

Jesus said, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

Hmm. First, can we just acknowledge there were social norms in Jesus’ day that do not carry over into ours. Just because Jesus said something, doesn’t mean we should say it. Like, as another example, on numerous occasions, Jesus called his mom “Woman.” Can I just suggest...don’t. Like, if Stephanie tells Henry to clean up the dishes and he quotes Jesus in reply, “Woman, what concern is that to you and me,” well, first I’m going to go in the other room and giggle, but then he’s going to be in big trouble. So this is one of those cases where first-century language should stay in the first-century.

This is more serious than that though. In the context of the conversation, can you see how this takes things a step further? Here we have not just a demographic distinction (you’re not of Israel), but a qualitative distinction. In Jesus’ Jewish world, the people of Israel knew themselves to be God’s children by way of the covenant. They were God’s chosen people, and no one else was. Pagans, like this Canaanite woman, were sometimes called dogs because they were not ritually clean; they were impure in the same way dogs, with a predilection for sniffing out urine and bottoms and dead things, are not exactly pure. From the Jewish perspective, giving the Messiah’s gifts to pagans was a pearls before swine situation.

Yet, even allowing for different time, and with that religious context, there is a still certain ugliness to this, isn’t there? The ugliest names, of course, are the group nicknames we use to categorize people, dismiss people, and devalue people. Certainly, in the wake of the horrible, racist, hate-filled language that turned to violence last week in Charlottesville, to say nothing of the vile acts in Barcelona, we just need to say that these sorts of names — children and dogs — are not the way should talk about each other.

And the fact that these words rest on the lips of Jesus is at least a little uncomfortable, right? By way of resisting the pleas of the woman for help, he does a distressingly thorough job of articulating an ugly sort of Jewish exclusivism, which was degrading to other ethnic groups.

But this story isn’t in the Bible to teach us about the religious and ethnic barriers that kept a Canaanite woman from reaching out to Jesus. In fact, if this story ended right here, with Jesus saying “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs,” the rest of this book wouldn’t make much sense, and you and I wouldn’t be here. No, this story is in the Bible to show us that those sorts of barriers, even when articulated by Jesus, crumble beneath the love of God and the power of faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus sets the barriers up, so that they can come down.

The woman doesn't argue the point. She doesn't protest, "But Jesus, don't you really think we're all made in God's image?" She accepts the metaphor, but refuses to accept the consequence of it. She says, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

The question the woman faces is whether she has to be something she is not in order to for God's grace to work in her life. The disciples standing around are facing this same question: does that woman need to be something she is not in order for Jesus to act? Do you get how that is the question here? Do think you have to be something you are not in order for God's grace to work in your life?

Most people, from Jewish fishermen wandering around Tyre and Sidon two thousand years ago, to divorced dads spending their evenings alone in suburban apartments with a six pack and a Playstation 4, most people assume the answer is yes, you need to be somebody you're not.

The first century Jewish stance, the one Jesus humbled himself to articulate for all to see, was yes, you have to be someone else — you have to be an Israelite. As an answer, that one at least had the weight of an ancient covenantal tradition with the one true God behind it. Our answers are not so good today.

The alt-right stance is something like you need to have white skin and you better not be Catholic or Jew or an immigrant. The suburban stance is you have to have a two parent family with well-adjusted children succeeding in multiple activities and appear to have it all together. For our older folks, it feels like its something about you have to have all your kids and grandkids succeeding at life. For kindergartners — at least at one school parents were telling me about — it is your wardrobe has to be made of Under Armor. For teenagers, I won't even pretend like I know. I'm just very sure that teenagers spend a lot of time hearing that they need to be someone they are not.

None of that, none of that, prevents the grace of God acting in our life. Look at the way this passage ends. Verse 28: "Then Jesus answered her, 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as your wish.' And her daughter was healed instantly."

"Great is your faith." The thing that got her to God, the thing that made it possible for Jesus Christ to work in her life, was her faith. It wasn't that she became something she was not. It was that she believed something about who He was. Once you see this, you can see it in the whole exchange. She calls him "Lord, Son of David," and then calls him "Lord" and then "Lord" again. She believes, from the beginning, in Jesus.

We have access to God through faith in Jesus Christ. Not through our ethnic or racial background, not through our health, wealth or worldly success, not through our kids, not through our physical appearance, not through who loves us. Great

faith, like that of the woman, will bring us to the place where God's power and grace is active and transforming in our lives. It's not by changing what we can't, but by believing in He who can.

At St. Andrew's we proclaim (it's right there in our logo) "A faith for all ages." I love that about our church; I love that we proclaim the faith of the generations to people of all different ages; and I love that the word is "faith," not "A church for all ages," because it is faith in our Lord that brings us into the knowledge and love of God.

What I wish I'd been able to tell that couple in Princeton before they got in their car and drove away is that it's a wonderful thing we are not worth so much as to gather up those crumbs, for it reminds us that's not how we get to God anyway. We can drop the striving, the pretense, the stress and the sense of failure. When we come to God in faith, "Lord, help me," we can stop pretending to be who we aren't and let Him work on who are actually are.

May we never tell one another, or tell ourselves, that we are unqualified, ineligible, or unworthy of God's love. That's not how this works. We don't have to qualify. We are actually never worthy to gather up the crumbs underneath God's table — but by grace, through faith, God has invited us to the banquet anyway.