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Eating Crumbs

a sermon on Mark 7.24-37

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Have you ever felt as if all you got in life were the crumbs? Somehow, when the table was being set, you never got a chair. Now the feast goes on. Other people enjoy the good things. Other people know happiness and love. But you are on the outside looking in. You are under the table, subsisting on crumbs. Too many people feel this way. I hope you are not one of them, but if you are, I have good news for you. In fact, I have good news for all of us, because our scripture reading takes us back to a time when we were not what we are today. A time when people like us were on the edge of God's purposes, with no real place at the table. This passage should make our hearts glad and grateful for God's grace, for by his grace we find our rightful place ... or perhaps that is saying it wrong: not our rightful place, but rather the place he has chosen for us, which is far better than our rightful place could be.

I am preaching this passage in part because of my perverse love of a challenging passage. It is the lectionary reading for today, and when I saw that I thought, "I've never understood this passage. I ought to preach it." Actually I do understand the passage. What I do not understand is Jesus' initial response to the woman. Christians have always struggled with this passage because Jesus insults her and calls her a dog. That doesn't sound like the Jesus we know. Tone of voice could make all the difference, but unfortunately, we don't know what tone Jesus used. Some scholars claim Jesus must have been joking. He said it with a smile and used the word "doggie" instead of dog. Others argue that Jesus was intentionally rude, and the woman beat him in a verbal joust. Still others hold he was intentionally rude, but he did it to test her faith. A few have said he never called *her* a dog, which was a common Jewish insult in that day for a Gentile, a non-Jewish person; instead he was speaking figuratively about God's plan. By the way, you have to remember that in the first century, Jews were ruled by Gentiles. Jews were an often oppressed minority living in a Gentile world, trying to live for God, conscious that as God's people they were supposed to be different. But they generally resented Gentiles and could easily hate them, and so they talked about "Gentile dogs." I don't see how the woman could fail to think Jesus was talking about her when he said "dogs," and her response shows she took it that way. Why would Jesus insult her like that? Did he intend it as an insult at all? I can't answer those questions, but I can help you appreciate what's going on in this encounter.

To understand Jesus' encounter with this Gentile woman, you need to be aware of what has just happened. Jesus has had a run in with the Pharisees and scribes. They started it by picking on Jesus for not scrupulously observing some of their traditions, such as ritual hand washing. Jesus countered by telling them that a person is made unclean, not by what goes into the mouth, but by what comes out of the heart. He is talking about religious and moral cleanness. *They think he is suspect before God because of the way he washes his hands? What about how they care or their parents?* The debate got hot and ugly. Jesus took it to the people, telling the crowds that what defiles a person before God is the evil that comes from our hearts, not the food that goes into our stomachs. This was a shocking teaching from a Jewish rabbi. It threatened not only all those little human traditions that had sprung up over time, but also all the purity and food laws in the Law of Moses.

No wonder Jesus wanted to lay low for a while after this big dust up. He wanted to get away, to let the heat die down a bit and to rest, so he did something unique in the written witness to his life: he left the traditional boundaries of ancient Israel and traveled into thoroughly Gentile country. He did not want anyone to know he was there, but alas, his fame preceded him even outside Israel. Before long a woman showed up asking him to cast an unclean spirit out of her daughter. You should see a connection here. Jesus is about to put his teaching into action. Jesus had just been talking about what is clean and unclean – that is, what is acceptable to God and what is not! Here was a woman from outside God's people. She was unclean. Everything Jesus would have been taught told him she was unclean, and her daughter had an unclean spirit, and she bowed down to him and asked for his help.

To understand Jesus' reluctance, you need to know something about Israel's place in God's great plan of salvation. God chose Israel to be his special people. From the beginning, God's plan was to save the whole world. Humankind turned away from God, and God's plan was to save us from our sin and reconcile us to God. That plan began with Israel. From Israel came the Messiah, Jesus. Like many other Jews, Jesus picked up from the Old Testament the direction of God's plan. He knew that when the Messiah redeemed Israel, then the rest of the world would be brought under God's saving rule. The door would be opened for Gentiles also to take their place in the kingdom of God alongside Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But, Jesus also knew that moment had not arrived yet!

Jesus is the Messiah, and when the woman approached him, his mission was a work-in-progress. He had not yet redeemed Israel by his death on the cross. He had no intention of getting sidetracked by a Gentile mission. That would come soon enough. It did. But that was the job God gave to Peter, and above all to Paul, and to many others – including you and me! We are supposed to tell the whole world about Jesus. But that was not Jesus' job. His job was to die for the sins of the world – to be Israel's Messiah and the Savior of the world. Although Jesus had dealt with Gentiles before (for

example, casting demons out of a Gentile man), he may have been alarmed by the prospect of finding his mission off course if Gentiles flocked to him in droves. So he refused initially.

This incident reminds us, by the way, that Jesus did not heal just to be nice. Exorcisms and healings were signs that God's kingdom was arriving. They were evidence that God's plan had reached the critical moment.

The woman, however, was determined. Her faith stands in stark contrast to the unbelief of the scribes and Pharisees. Who should have recognized God in Jesus' ministry? Who was prepared for it? Who knew the scriptures? Who should have been the first to figure things out? The scribes and Pharisees! No one was better positioned than they. Who actually got it right? Some woman – we don't even know her name – she spoke Greek, not Aramaic like Jesus. She wasn't from Israel. Religiously, culturally, every which way – she was an outsider. And Jesus reminded her of that. But she had faith. ... This account is in the gospel because it was a prelude of things to come.

Her faith stands in contrast to the Pharisees. Her understanding surpasses even the disciples'. After Jesus lectured the Pharisees and the crowds about what is clean and unclean in God's eyes, he had to explain his meaning to his disciples because they didn't understand at first. They were slow to catch on. This woman was not. She also had one more quality necessary for anyone who wants to follow Jesus, a quality rare among people in the gospels and among Christians today. That quality is humility. No matter how I try to blunt Jesus' harsh reply to her, it really sounds as if he told her she wasn't worthy of his effort. How would you have responded to that? Many would have insulted him in return and stormed out angry. She accepted it but pressed on! She is a model of faith, understanding, and humility for disciples in every age.

This passage shows that bringing Gentiles into God's family had been God's plan all along. Gentiles, of course, had always found God's blessings on the edge of Israel, so to speak. Think of Namaan the leper. A few had come to know God and become part of his people, such as Ruth. God's plan, however, was to bring the Gentiles into his family *as Gentiles*. This passage makes clear that although Jesus had been sent "only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel," as he put it [Mt 15.24], he approved the Gentile mission, once the time was right. When Peter and Paul and some others began preaching to Gentiles later on, as recorded in the book of Acts, many Gentiles believed. Some Jewish believers had a lot of trouble accepting Gentiles as brothers and sisters in Christ. They had grown up being told these people were dogs. They were unclean. They were unacceptable to God. Old prejudices are hard to break. This account of Jesus' encounter with the woman no doubt made it into the gospel because (1) it happened and (2) Mark saw it as relevant for the later church. Jesus is the Savior of the world. All who believe have life through him.

As for us, this passage is very meaningful because we are Gentiles. Unless you are ethnically and culturally and/or religiously Jewish, you are a Gentile. I think that's all, certainly most, of us here. We are Gentiles ... but ... we are no longer dogs. Now we are children. No crumbs for us anymore. We have a place at the table.

That's the meaning of the Lord's Supper. This is the Lord's table. It is for his family – for all who by faith and baptism belong to him. Your race doesn't matter. Your color doesn't matter. How much money you have (or don't have) doesn't matter. How good you are, how smart you are, your nationality – none of these things is a criteria for eating this sacrament. Faith in Jesus – your relationship with him – is the only requirement. (Oh, scripture does mention the importance of right relationships with others in the family of faith. If you have an issue with someone, better to reconcile first and then receive the sacrament. [Mt 5.23-24])

The door has been opened for us. That moment too is recorded in the gospel. At the moment Jesus died on the cross, a Roman centurion – a Gentile – looked at him and said, "Surely this man was the Son of God." And from that moment on, God's family has been open to all people through faith in Jesus Christ. It wasn't the centurion who made the difference. It was Jesus, fulfilling his mission, redeeming Israel, saving the world. And so the prophets were right. When God saved his people, the world came to know his glory.

"But wait!" you may be thinking. "We are literally eating crumbs now! This piece of bread comes by. I tear off a tiny piece, just some crumbs really. That's a little ironic, don't you think? You're preaching about how we don't have to eat crumbs anymore, but that's what we're doing!" I admit, it would be ironic *if* that were all that's going on in the Lord's Supper. If it were just a bunch of Christians eating crumbs while thinking about Jesus, it would be pretty pathetic. But that's not what's about to happen. Oh, no. The bread we eat may be a small portion, but it is a sign. Our eating is not about the bread. The bread points to something else. That something else is real, and it's a lot bigger and greater than a morsel of bread! It is nothing less than Jesus himself.

You see, when we partake of the Lord's Supper in faith, he gives himself to us, literally – not physically, but literally and spiritually. We feed on him in our hearts by faith. We are not eating crumbs. We are eating the body and blood of Jesus Christ ... spiritually speaking. We may be Gentiles, but we are children of Abraham by faith, so we don't have to eat crumbs anymore. Jesus gives us the bread of life. ...

Do you ever feel as if all you get in life are the crumbs? You don't like your job. Your family is a mess. You are lonely, bored, depressed. You have health problems. You've lost your joy and passion. You can't remember the last time you had such a good time you completely forgot yourself and all your problems. Ever feel that way? You don't

have to live off the crumbs. No matter what challenges you face or heavy burdens you bear, God wants you at his table. Do not settle for crumbs!

If you do not know Jesus, you are missing out. He can set you free to live joyfully. The eternal life he gives begins with abundant life now. Of all the gifts he gives, and there are many, the very best one is himself. You can know him and his strength and peace.

If you do know Jesus, you have no excuse for living off the crumbs of life. God has given you a taste of his glory. You know how grace feels and what it means. You know you are a child of God and you have a place at the table. This table right here, and ... in the kingdom of God. Jesus liked dinner parties so much that he often said the kingdom of God is like one. He talked about having a place at the table. If you know him, you have a place at the table, right alongside Abraham, Moses, David, Mary, and all the rest. Crumbs!? God doesn't give his children crumbs! Jesus gave the Gentile woman more than crumbs. He died so that you can have more than crumbs.

Come to the table. Come as God's children. He has prepared a place for you. Amen.

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