

Sermon “Crumbs Under the Table”

Commotion Sunday, September 9, 2018

Scripture: Proverbs 22: 1-2,8-9,22-23, Mark 7:24-37

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Our first scripture reading is selected verses from the wisdom book of Proverbs, chapter 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23. Wisdom literature arises out of the theological insight that God permeates all of life, and that because of this, there are set structures in the creation that humans must recognize and then live by. Good conduct strengthens not only humans but the whole fabric of creation. The proverbs in today’s reading affirm that a person’s reputation and character measure one’s worth, rather than wealth and those who share their bread with the poor are blessed. Hear now, the word of God.

*A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold. The rich and the poor have this in common: the LORD is the maker of them all.*

*Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity, and the rod of anger will fail. Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor.*

*Do not rob the poor because they are poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate; <sup>23</sup> for the LORD pleads their cause and despoils of life those who despoil them. Amen.*

Our second scripture reading is Mark 7:24-37. Leaving behind the debates between Jesus and the Pharisees about clean and unclean foods, today’s lectionary reading about Jesus’ interactions with a Gentile woman whose child was ill and with a man who could not hear and had a speech impediment affirm that all people are clean and welcome at God’s table. Hear now God’s Holy Word.

*<sup>24</sup> From there Jesus set out and went away to the region of Tyre! He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, <sup>25</sup> but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. <sup>26</sup> Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. <sup>27</sup> He said to her, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” <sup>28</sup> But she answered him, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” <sup>29</sup> Then Jesus said to her, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.” <sup>30</sup> So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.*

*<sup>31</sup> Then Jesus returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. <sup>32</sup> They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. <sup>33</sup> He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. <sup>34</sup> Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” <sup>35</sup> And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. <sup>36</sup> Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. <sup>37</sup> They were astounded beyond measure, saying, “He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.” Amen.*

Title of the sermon: "Crumbs Under the Table"

*The Text: But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Mark 7: 28*

Let us pray: We are grateful, merciful God, for the experiences and interactions in life that help us grow in our ability to show mercy. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our Strength and Redeemer. Amen.

I remember very vividly reading this interaction between Jesus and the *Syrophoenician* woman when I was in high school. I was uncomfortable with this passage then, even as I am today. The words Jesus spoke did not fit my understanding of who Jesus is. At that time in my life, my way of dealing with things that didn't neatly fit into my world view was to ignore and to intentionally disregard them. I literally crossed this passage out in my J.B. Phillips New Testament Bible with a red pen. Limited as my world view may have been, I was comfortable with my perspective, and did not welcome anyone or anything that might threaten that level of comfort.

Ironically, as I look back on my life I learned this defense mechanism from the church community which nurtured my faith as a little girl. Little did I know then that one day I would become someone who threatened their world view and who would need to be ignored and intentionally disregarded. As a young woman, when I announced that I was called to the ordained ministry, I not only fell from grace, I fell out of the picture of the way things were supposed to be. (The Reformed Church of America did not ordain women at that time. Thankfully, they do today.)

Eighteenth Century literary critic Samuel Johnson summed up the feelings about women preachers, in a famous quote which I recently heard in the film "The Post," with Meryl Streep playing Katherine Graham, who was trying to find her voice as the owner of the Washington Post following her husband's suicide during the Watergate Scandal. Thank God she did.

The quote is Johnson's reply to a friend who had heard a woman preach at a Quakers' meeting. "Sir," Johnson said, "*a woman's preaching is like a dog's walking on his hind legs. It is not done well; but you are surprised to find it done at all.*"

It would be two centuries before the Presbyterian Church allowed a woman to speak on the floor of the General Assembly in 1924 and in the pulpit with the ordination of the first woman pastor, the Reverend Margaret Towner in 1956.

We all have our bias and prejudices. We all have opinions of how things should be, based on our particular life experience. This is not surprising! However, when we ignore or intentionally disregard those who threaten our worldview, we deny ourselves the opportunity to grow beyond our limited perspective. We deny ourselves "the crumbs under the table."

I am grateful for those early followers of Jesus who included this challenging story in the Gospel of Mark. By including this interaction, we see a very human Jesus who may have been surprised himself and a little embarrassed at the condescending words that came out of his mouth to this foreign woman.

It is not enough to excuse Jesus' retort because we suspect that he may have been weary from his earlier confrontation with the scribes and Pharisees. It is also less than satisfying to suggest that Jesus was simply focusing on his ministry to Jews rather than Gentiles.

Dr. Amy Jill-Levine, a New Testament Professor at Vanderbilt University Divinity School who spoke in our sanctuary two years ago, contends in her book A Feminist Companion to Mark that Jesus was likely aware of the economic hardship that many Jews in the region of Tyre experienced due to the exploits of the Gentile landowners. His rebuff of the Syrophenician woman may well have reflected this.

When Jesus heard the words he spoke, perhaps he recognized within himself the hatred and prejudice that had been nurtured between the Jews and Gentiles for centuries. It was not uncommon during Jesus' time for Jews to refer to Gentiles as dogs. This is a typical defense mechanism among people with long-standing prejudices. We dehumanize those we disdain to rationalize our inhumane feelings.

It is much more difficult to hold people in disdain when we come face to face with them in a relationship, when we work side by side, or when we break bread together in table fellowship. It is in these unexpected partnerships that we experience the mysterious and merciful ways of God...and the crumbs under the table.

Surely, this was a moment of grace in the life of our Savior. The words he speaks and she hears and the words she speaks and he hears bring redemption and healing to both of them. The surprising response of this woman (who surely had been called many names during her lifetime) enlightens our Lord. From this woman's voice, Jesus grew in his understanding of himself and of God's merciful ways. Her faith calls forth a larger vision of God's mission to the Gentiles. Jesus changes his mind about the mercy he will extend to her daughter and commends her outspokenness.

How fortuitous that the next story in Mark's gospel is the healing of a man who was deaf and who had an impediment in his speech. This healing metaphorically speaks to Christ's transformation as he hears himself and recognizes that his words to the Syrophenician woman were an impediment to God's mercy. May we have the grace and wisdom to listen to ourselves and the courage to speak the good news that the Lord is the Maker of everyone born.

As we partake in Communion Sunday and celebrate the ruckus of God's Spirit in another year together and as we prepare to receive the Bread of Life in Holy Communion, may we come to the table with gratitude and joy for the wideness of God's mercy, for the gift of the Syrophenician woman, for the bread on the table, and for the crumbs under the table. Amen.