

Crumbs from the Table

Matthew 15:21-28

For many of us, it seems like we're living off of crumbs. Ever since things started closing down, we haven't had the full experience we're used to. Online classes were crumbs compared to the in-person learning. Cooking at home was like crumbs compared to the elaborate meals in fancy restaurants. Online church is crumbs compared to worshipping in person.

Now, months later, we still seem to be living off of crumbs. We can watch Major League Baseball, but only 60 games, or less if you're a Cardinals or Marlins fan. The NBA and NHL taking place without fans and so long separated from the last games aren't much. The government stimulus checks were just a drop in the bucket compared to the costs of lost income and economic activity. Getting to watch new movies that are only available to stream, and can't be shown on the big screen of a theater. Graduations, proms, weddings all canceled, postponed, or with significantly fewer people than planned. And now recovering from the storm damage, you may be eating the crumbs of what you could salvage from your freezer and fridge.

That's what we think of when we think of crumbs, which is why it seems so insulting, so different, for Jesus to just offer crumbs to the Canaanite woman. That's not how we're used to seeing Jesus work. When a Canaanite woman comes up to him, he first tries to ignore her. When that doesn't work, he tells her "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Then, he even calls her a dog! This isn't the Jesus we are used to hearing.

Why would he treat this foreign woman, this woman who came from the people who the Israelites had cast out when they came into the Promised Land, like the lower class, unclean, unwanted person that everyone else in Israel would have seen? Especially with the women in his family tree, listed in that genealogy at the beginning of Matthew. Rahab, the Canaanite prostitute who helped the Israelites in the lead-up to the battle of Jericho. Ruth, the woman from Moab, one of Israel's traditional enemies throughout the Old Testament. And the way his own mother would have been treated as an outcast as she tried to explain how she was not married yet was pregnant. If anyone could look back and see how outcasts were treated, it was Jesus. How could He of all people do this?

As much as the words of Jesus confuse us, the actions of Jesus should not. They point to what he really was doing. Jesus, however, is always a teacher, and is never afraid to vary his teaching methodology to get through to particularly thick-headed students. He'd been teaching his disciples in parables, even explaining to them what the parables meant. But the disciples still weren't quite getting it. His silence allows the disciples the chance to chime in and see if they've been paying attention. Jesus had just had a long discussion with the Pharisees about who was clean and who was unclean, who was in and who was out, and how to draw the lines between the two. If the disciples had been paying attention to that exchange, they would be correcting Jesus. They wouldn't just be dismissing the woman and her needs, thinking more about how to get back to what they were doing before her interruption. No, if the disciples had been paying attention to Jesus and his example, they would have stepped up, spoken up, stood up to Jesus and the words of the Pharisees he was using. But they didn't.

Jesus varies his teaching method. He treats the woman like the Pharisees would have, like the disciples would have. He even ups the ante of the conversation when he calls her a dog, when the disciples might have helped her just to get rid of her. But Jesus picks a woman who knows her Scriptures. She knows that even if God works first through the people of Israel, that the blessings God gives will overflow. The banquet table will be too small for all the food, and even the crumbs will be marvelous.

The Canaanite woman is the one with great faith. We're not told how she knows who Jesus is. We're not told how she knows to address him as Lord or Son of David, terms that refer to the Messiah a good Jew would be expected to know, but not a Gentile. Perhaps she'd received some inadvertent crumbs from the feast of stories of God that the Jews shared. In any case, she knows that Jesus is the only one who can help her daughter. Her faith isn't shaken when he talks to her like a Pharisee would, when he calls her a dog. Her faith is commended by Jesus as great. She says she would be content with crumbs, but Jesus gives her more than that. Her faith led her to someone who she shouldn't have talked to, who shouldn't have helped

her, but did, because that's what Jesus does. Jesus crosses lines and barriers.

The blessings of God were always meant to stream outward to all people. All the way back to Abraham, God blessed specific people not so that they could keep those blessings for themselves, or hold their special status as "chosen people" over those around them. They were blessed to be a blessing to the whole world. As we heard from Isaiah earlier, "'And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord...these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer... for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.' The Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, declares, 'I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered'" (Isaiah 56:1, 6-8). God gathers the outcasts of Israel, the ones who had been separated for any number of reasons, often for ritual uncleanness or illness.

Those feelings of separation and alienation, the acts that build walls between each other, all stem from the separation from God we experience because of our sin. The vertical separation between God and man leads to the horizontal separation between all people, between you and me. We were alienated from God, no longer connected to him.

But that's why Jesus came, to end that separation. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "God through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:18). When Jesus came into the world, He came to end the alienation between God and people by dying on the cross for us. With that, God reached down to us. The cross bridges the gap between God and each of us created by sin. That's why so many church steeples are topped with a cross. Not just so that the cross can be seen, but so that we remember how the God on high came down to us and crossed that gap.

The cross marks the end of separation. The end of separation because of sin, the end of separation between us. Any categories that we can think of to divide ourselves into: conservative or liberal, red state or blue state, city people or country people, rich or poor, young or old: whatever those categories are, they no longer divide us. Instead we are united into one body, the Body of Christ.

We are sent out into the world to share that Good News that Jesus crosses lines. We are sent out to share in that ministry of reconciliation. To share that picture of a time when all peoples will gather together to feast and celebrate with God, satisfied with more than just crumbs. Celebrating a unity that is deeper and longer lasting than anything the world can create on its own. Celebrating that Jesus crossed the lines created by sin to come to us, and sends us out to do the same.

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