

The Crumbs of the Living Bread; Isaiah 35: 4-7; Mark 7: 24-37

Isaiah 35: 4-7

Say to those who are of a fearful heart,

‘Be strong, do not fear!

Here is your God.

He will come with vengeance,  
with terrible recompense.

He will come and save you.’

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,  
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;  
then the lame shall leap like a deer,  
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.  
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,  
and streams in the desert;  
the burning sand shall become a pool,  
and the thirsty ground springs of water;  
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,  
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

Mark 7: 24-37

24 From there he 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, 25but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. 26Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. 27He 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.’ 28But she answered him, ‘Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.’ 29Then he said to her, ‘For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.’ 30So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

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

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

“From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre,” begins today’s lesson. Last week Jesus was dealing with the Jewish legal experts, the big shots from Jerusalem, who complained that his disciples were not following the Tradition of the Elders. The Tradition of

the Elders, as you recall, was not the Law of Moses but a body of rules the religious elites created to ensure the people of Israel lived in a manner that was “right and proper.” “Decently and in Order” the Presbyterians would say.

Jesus called them out as hypocrites, because he knew that they, in their hearts, didn’t care about the well-being of the people that God’s Law promoted and protected; rather, they were focused on the external compliance of the tradition of the elders.

Now, Jesus had been teaching, feeding, and healing among his own Jewish people and calming the stormy sea, and having to argue with religious leaders who were hardheaded as well as hard-hearted. Perhaps exhausted, “from there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre,” and “He entered a house and *did not want anyone to know he was there.*” You get the picture: this man needs a break!

When Mark simply says, “Jesus went away to Tyre,” what Mark’s original audience knew but we don’t, is that Jesus went way far away, to a major seaport, not on the sea of Galilee but on the Mediterranean Sea way to the north. He really got away.

Now there was a tension between the residents of this non-Jewish city of Tyre and the minority Jewish residents who lived in the surrounding Jewish villages. By economic pressure, those Jewish communities were forced to be the ‘breadbasket’ for the city elite.

So, that’s the backdrop of Jesus’ encounter with this Syrophenician woman in the region of Tyre, a Gentile. Jesus is in his vulnerable human condition, tired and far from his home in a foreign land. There, he is confronted by a woman, who in Jewish eyes, was of a lesser pagan race and gender, and was part of the city’s resented upper class.

This woman may have been well-to-do, but what good is it when your child, your flesh and blood is suffering. Her wealth had not brought healing to her daughter. So, this desperate mother sought out Jesus, a healer she had so much about, and begged him to cast out demons from her daughter, the cause of the daughter’s ailment, as they understood it.

Now, Jesus’ response is said to make this passage one of the most controversial and difficult passages. He says 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.” Gasp! Did Jesus just call this poor woman a dog? That’s demeaning! How could he be so rude and mean and insulting? These have been the common reactions even of most Bible commentators. Some have tried to “excuse” Jesus’s

acting-out by suggesting, “well, Jesus meant say, a nice puppy dog.” Well, it’s still calling one group of people “children” and the other “dog.”

When faced with a difficult or puzzling Bible passage, it is best to interpret that passage by what we know to be true from the rest of the Bible. If a particular passage presents Jesus acting “out-of-character,” like here, then most likely our assumption about, or understanding of what Jesus’ action means is wrong.

Jesus demeaning or insulting, or lacking compassion for a desperate mother begging for her daughter’s healing, is against everything the Scripture tells us about Jesus. So, most likely, we are wrong about what we assume about Jesus’s action here. If this is not Jesus simply being rude and acting out in his grouchy moments, then, what is he doing?

Because the Gentiles were ritually unclean, some Jews regularly referred to the Gentiles as dogs. Yes, to find that expression in Jesus’ mouth and on his lips is very disturbing, but Jesus is not merely calling the Gentiles dogs here. Taken as a whole, his statement is a statement about his role as the Shepherd of the flock of Israel, his mission as the Jewish Messiah... in other words, the Tradition of the human condition in which Jesus existed.

Up to this point, the “sinners” he befriended, the likes of Tax Collectors, were Jews; when he fed the hungry multitudes, they were all “his people,” Jews. He was their rabbi. Jesus’ ministry was mainly in Galilee, and he did not go into the Gentile world on that day specifically to “bring the Word” to the pagans... It was the Syrophenician woman who sought him out. That encounter brought to light this fence the world, specifically Jesus’ Jewish world, had placed between them.

There he was, as Jesus faced the Syrophenician woman begging for his help for the sake of her daughter, Jesus faced the Tradition that delimited his life-giving, saving mission for God’s beloved world. So, what does he do? He names this “fence” of the tradition before the woman. It is the Tradition, rather than Jesus personally, that said “Let the children be fed first; for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

Confronted by the Gentile woman, Jesus acknowledges this very real, human condition that stands between him and her; this “fence” that stood between them that the woman clearly would have been aware. Jesus goes, “You know, there is this fence thing, you are a Gentile, and I am supposed to be saving only those in covenant with God.”

This response by Jesus, which so many people take it to be harsh or demeaning, actually gives this Gentile woman a chance to respond. Even though she and her people are likened to dogs, it is still an invitation for her to make her case before him. Historically, women are told to be quiet, but Jesus gives her a chance to speak out; Jesus gives her a voice. Many people hear Jesus' response as a rejection of the woman's plea. But isn't he actually giving her a chance to overcome the tradition?

The woman doesn't not let this opportunity go. She acknowledges this Tradition; she acknowledges that the children of Israel should be fed first, AND counters with an even deeper truth that even the dog under the table eat the children's crumbs. She essentially defies the boundary, trusting in the power of the crumbs from the living bread. She knows the way of the world even Jesus is being subjected to by being part of it, AND she knows God's compassion is superior to the human condition.

Her response to Jesus is "Yes, AND." Yes, you are the Lord of the House of Israel, AND for the rest of the world. She showed up and stood up for her demon-possessed daughter, who is naturally also a gentile and female, a doubly unacceptable in Jewish eye. And yet, she appealed to the power of the true bread that feeds all who hunger. "Even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

Bingo! I can almost hear Jesus say to her enthusiastically, and follow, "For saying that you may go." And her daughter is healed. This is a beautiful moment when Jesus and the Syrophenician woman together over came ad broke down the "fence" of the human Tradition, and the power of God's love came through.

The crumbs of the living bread that came down from heaven for the life of the world, are living crumbs, and falling from off from the table, found their way to feed and give life to those who did not have a seat at the table. The crumbs carry the life of the living bread.

It is as if the woman emboldened Jesus to embrace his ministry beyond the fence of Tradition in which Jesus had been placed, for in the second story we heard today, Jesus moves from Tyre to the Decapolis, deeper into the region of the gentiles.

Now we know Jesus is able to heal someone with a single word, without touching, or even "remotely." Yet, Jesus, in this land of Gentile, makes the point of touching the man who is "doubly unacceptable" in Jewish eyes because of his blindness and his speech impediment, and

he touches him at exactly where he needs healing, “opening” his ear to hear the Good News and his tongue to sing God’s praises.

Last week we heard Jesus sad rightly that we nurse evil thoughts in our hearts and so we ask Jesus to fill our hearts with his love, so we may be transformed. And thus transformed, we go out into the world to touch where God’s love is needed the most. We are the living crumbs of the living bread, meant to fall off the table to reach who hunger for the true food. Thanks be to God.