First Mennonite Church Reedley, California

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The Blessing of Crumbs

Birthday celebrations were primarily family affairs in my family when I was growing up. We often invited the grandparents and we could choose what kind of birthday cake we wanted. My favorite was and still is angel food. I love the spongy moist sweetness of the cake. In my opinion angel food doesn’t even need frosting. But what I also enjoyed (and still do) was scraping the crumbs from the pan once the cake has been removed. I take a table knife and run it along the inside of the pan, scraping the crumbs from the surface and collecting them in a small bowl. Those crumbs are a wonderful foretaste of the goodness that is coming with the cake itself.

We all have some experience with crumbs: We deliberately put bread crumbs in dressing, cracker crumbs in meat loaf, and crumbly toppings on apple crisp. With less anticipation, perhaps with the exception of very young children who delight in throwing food, we also get out the broom to sweep up food crumbs under the table after a meal.

Bread was the mainstay of meals in Jesus’ time. It was baked every day except the Sabbath, for which extra bread was baked the day before. Bread was the center of every meal. When all the meat and vegetables were gone, there was still bread. When it was gone there was nothing. For the poor, bread was often made of barley. Bread for the wealthy was made from wheat. Bread was not only eaten, it was also the “utensil” to scoop up the beans and lentils, the gravies and sauces. And when the meal was finished, the leftover bread was used as a napkin to wipe the grease and sauce from the hands. The soiled bread was dropped to the floor for the family dogs to eat.

In our text today Jesus has left the Jewish settlements in Galilee and traveled to the Gentile area of Tyre and Sidon. He has retired to a house, Mark doesn’t tell us whose house. Jesus does not want people to know he is there. He has left behind the crowds who followed him in Galilee. Perhaps he is tired. He has been healing the sick. He has fed 5000 people with only five loaves and 2 fishes, He has had a lengthy discussion with the Pharisees about purity, declaring that it is not the outward rituals of handwashing and cleaning utensils that make a person clean, nor is it the lack of those rituals that make a person unclean. He has explained to his disciples that it is what comes from the heart that makes a person clean or unclean….It is from the heart that evil intentions come. And everywhere he has gone the crowds have followed. Perhaps he simply wants some peace and quiet.

But word of Jesus’ actions and teaching have preceded him, even into this area populated largely by Hellenistic people of Canaanite descent. So Jesus’ retreat is interrupted by a Syro-Phoenician woman whose daughter is troubled by an unclean spirit. Her daughter is ill and the mother is desperate. She has heard of Jesus; she believes he can heal her daughter. Mark doesn’t tell us the woman’s name but he does give us a few clues about her. She was not Jewish; her background was likely pagan, largely influenced by Hellenistic Greek ideas. She was likely wealthy since the text reveals that her daughter slept on a bed rather than a mattress like the poor. To come to Jesus the way she did she had to break a number of social and cultural boundaries. She was a Gentile; he was a Jew; moreover she was a woman coming alone to speak with a Jewish man. In socio-economic terms she was from the wealthy upper class; Jesus represented the poor, lower peasant class. But he was also a renowned teacher, a healer, a Rabbi. All sorts of boundaries were crossed in this encounter.

The woman enters the house, uninvited, and throws herself down at his feet, begging him to heal her daughter. If this were a typical healing story we would expect Jesus to respond favorably. We expect him to comply and heal the child. But instead Jesus rebukes her, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” To our twenty-first century ears this is a troubling statement. Perhaps it was to her also. To call a woman a “dog” is like calling her a “bitch” in today’s terms. It is offensive. It troubles me; it should trouble us. It is a hard saying, so hard that scholars debate what Jesus meant and why he said it.

Was it his humanness coming out, the result of being tired, interrupted in retreat, trying to rest? Was it said with a twinkle in his eye; he did use the diminutive form meaning little dog, like a puppy. Was he saying that he had been sent to the Jewish people, and God’s mercy for Gentiles was to come later? Or was it the expected thing, the thing Jews often said of Gentiles? Rabbi Joshua ben Levi told a parable that went this way: “If Gentiles without the law enjoy blessings like that, how many more blessings will Israel, the people of God, enjoy? It is like a king who made a feast and brought in the guests and placed them at the door of his palace. They saw the dogs come out, with pheasants, and heads of fatted birds, and calves in their mouths. Then the guests began to say, ‘If it be thus with the dogs, how much more luxurious will the meal itself be?’ And the nations of the world are compared to dogs, as it is said (Isaiah 56:11) ‘The dogs have a mighty appetite.’”

An Asian, post-colonial reading of this passage offers another perspective on Jesus’ words. Jesus often spoke and acted on behalf of the poor, the voiceless, the outsiders. In this encounter, however, Jesus is the outsider. He is in Gentile territory. The woman who has come has come with the power of social position, wealth, status. She represents a wealthy class who often ate well while the poor Jewish peasants of Galilee who grew the food did not have enough to eat. Poling Sun, Professor of Biblical Studies at the Baptist Theological Seminary in Singapore suggests that Jesus is “naming the dog,” that is naming the power and domination embodied in her socio-economic status. To ‘name the dog” is to reveal the power that deceives, oppresses and marginalizes others. Poling says, “Jesus is the voice of those powerless to name the dog.” To name the dog is necessary in order that power recognize and acknowledge the cry of the powerless. Only when that happens is reconciliation possible. Poling sees the woman’s response to Jesus as that acknowledgement. “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” She accepts Jesus’ words, in effect relying on Jesus’ mercy rather than her own status and power to bring about her desired result, the healing of her daughter. Poling compares her response to that of the Ninevites who repented when Jonah delivered God’s message.

Perhaps this encounter is an acted parable. It reminds me of a script, where Jesus and the woman feed each other the lines, with the woman allowed to provide the punch line. “Even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” In this encounter most scholars see a foretaste of the early church’s mission to the Gentiles in the book of Acts. In fact there are some intriguing parallels. Jesus feeds a Jewish crowd and there are 12 baskets of leftovers. Shortly after Mark reports the dialogue with the Pharisees about food and purity; Jesus in effect declares all foods clean. This is followed by his retreat to Tyre and the encounter with the Gentile woman. In Acts Peter has a vision of all kinds of animals and is told to eat, not to call unclean what God has called clean. This is followed by the visit to the Gentile centurion Cornelius in his home. Peter not only preaches to Cornelius’ household; they believe and he stays several days. In the Gospel of Mark, the story of the Syro-Phoenician woman is followed by Jesus’ journey through Gentile territory, where he heals a deaf and mute man, and then feeds 4000 people with seven large baskets of leftovers. Unlike the twelve baskets at the former feeding, the word for basket here is the large basket like that used to let Paul down from the walls of Damascus.

We people like to draw lines, boundaries. We build a wall between our nation and Mexico, and talk about who belongs and who doesn’t. We think of ourselves as the best, the most knowledgeable, the wisest, the elite. We gather with people who act or think the way we do, and close our ears to those who think or act differently. We try to get into the “in” group and at best ignore or at worst bully those who don’t belong. We call names: illegal, alien, chicken, dumb, queer, the list goes on-- “anabaptist’ was once a term of derision. In so many ways we call each other “dogs’ and try to belong by keeping others out.

“Let the children be fed first,” Jesus said, “For it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Jesus spoke and in that spoken word revealed the divisions and distrust and oppression that we inflict upon each other. In this encounter it is the woman who speaks God’s word of grace: “Even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” You see, in God’s providence there is more than enough for all of us. The Jewish crowd was fed, and there were twelve baskets of leftovers. The Gentiles were fed and there were seven large baskets of leftovers. The woman was content with “crumbs’ because the crumbs were enough. She recognized God’s mercy and compassion that have no limits, no boundaries. There is enough grace, enough mercy, enough love, enough forgiveness, enough of all that we need for life God does not make distinctions. Nor should we.

The crumbs are blessed because we all need them. When have I been left out? God welcomes me. In God’s family I belong. I am home.

When have I felt broken, in need? God is there for me. God is my strength and God’s people support me.

When have I come up against institutions and systems that oppress or limit me (because I am a woman, or disabled, or LBGTQ, or black, or brown, or for whatever reason)…God has defeated the powers in Christ, and they cannot separate me from God’s love. In God I am free.

Free to love. Free to share. Free from fear. Free from the sin, from the wrongs that separate me from God and from others. Free to be the person God wants me to be. Free to participate in what God is doing in the world.

So where do we need to “name the dog’? What are the systems and powers that oppress people today? In what ways are we participating in those systems and powers---for good or for bad? In what ways can we extend God’s mercy into those systems? And where do we see hurting people, where do we need to share power, to enable others? Who needs us to share, to care, to show kindness, or to pray? Who needs to be included? In what ways can we participate in God’s welcoming table? How do we extend that welcome to others?

I don’t pretend to have all the answers. But crumbs are often little things, like seeds that are little and grow, or yeast that leavens the dough and causes it to rise, small things that make a difference when God is present. Our world is full of the hard things: hurt, fear, disease, oppression, violence, the lack of power and hope. May we follow Jesus, seeking even the small ways that we can participate in God’s way offering healing and hope. Even if we only have crumbs, even if we only ask for crumbs; there is plenty and crumbs are bountiful. The woman was willing to settle for crumbs, and her daughter was healed. God’s crumbs are enough; they do not run out, for there is no limit.