

**Matthew 15:10-28**

*More Than Just the Crumbs*

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama

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[10 Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, "Listen and understand: 11 it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles." 12 Then the disciples approached and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?" 13 He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. 14 Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit." 15 But Peter said to him, "Explain this parable to us." 16 Then he said, "Are you also still without understanding? 17 Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? 18 But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. 19 For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. 20 These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile."]

21 Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. 22 Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." 23 But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." 24 He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." 25 But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." 26 He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." 27 She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." 28 Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

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Most days during this pandemic I do okay—with multiple Zoom meetings, telephone calls, and the weekly scramble to complete all the different parts of my work, I don't feel the emptiness so much. And then I'll have a day when I hit a wall, and the deep loneliness of this time hits me. Do you get those days? But then, the next day, I generally bounce back and go on. Which is weird—that I can bounce back when nothing has changed. But I've begun to realize that, in many

ways, this existence is not so different than the norm. The semi-quarantine in which most of us now live, is simply a physical manifestation of the social quarantine we've had all along—the isolation bubbles of our different races, classes, ideologies. Even before this pandemic, American culture was in a crisis of loneliness. So we've been prepared for this. We've had practice.

But that doesn't make it any better, not deep down. And one of the reasons so many of us are drawn to Jesus is because he promises to break down that isolation. He promises a path to true community. But then, we hear him say those harsh words to the Canaanite woman—"It isn't right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs," and it's like a slap in the face to everything we believe and hope for from him.

So, I have to ask, why did Jesus *go* to Tyre and Sidon, if he wasn't going to have anything to do with non-Israelites? The regions of Tyre and Sidon were Gentile regions. Why go there-- just so he could snub that poor, Canaanite woman?

Especially after he just had that tense conversation with the Pharisees about handwashing—which wasn't about hygiene—they didn't know, yet, about microbes, so don't take Jesus' words as a message to stop washing your hands, especially now! Handwashing was understood as an act of ritual purity—a way of separating those who were ritually clean from those who were ritually unclean. Jesus was rejecting the hypocrisy of a person claiming to be ritually clean, when their every thought, word, and action were polluted.

Those were his words to the Pharisees, but then, he goes to the Gentile territories, to the land of the ritually unclean—only to reject the first Gentile who approaches him, even though she speaks with respect, and addresses him, in appropriate Jewish fashion, as "Son of David."

After the multiplication of the loaves and the fishes that showed that there was no shortage of God's mercy to go around; did he go to the Gentile territories just to announce that there was, in fact, a scarcity of mercy? After sending his disciples off in a boat to the other side, then walking across the water to help them in their struggle to get there; is he now saying that we must all stay on our *own* side? After speaking so boldly about clean and unclean, and saying they didn't mean what the Pharisees thought they did—did he go to Gentile territories just to announce that only the children of Israel could be considered clean?

Or, was the progression of his own spiritual journey like following a trail of breadcrumbs, in which one step leads to another; a trail that even Jesus followed

without fully comprehending at the outset just where those breadcrumbs were leading?

Maybe Jesus, who shared both divinity and humanity, had been following his true calling with total faithfulness, but with the same incomplete understanding as his human siblings. Maybe it wasn't until this moment—there, in that foreign territory—that he finally saw the full implication of his own teachings, and it took the faithful persistence of a Gentile woman to get him there. In that conversation, she taught the teacher, revealing to him the larger meaning of his own words—that the human distinctions we always think are so important, don't matter at all. That God's love and mercy are there for all people who truly seek God.

But first, before that conversation can even begin, Jesus cuts her off entirely. When she sees him and calls out, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon," he doesn't respond to her, or even look her way. Imagine the sense of isolation, to have your very existence ignored or discounted.

Or maybe we don't need to imagine it. It's something we do to each other, all the time. The way white settlers discounted the humanity of Native Americans, slaughtering them or pushing them off of their land, yanking their children from them so they could "cleanse" them of their native language, their clothing, their religion. They emerged traumatized, "Americanized," yet never able to claim the full promise of this nation.

Or the way white Americans stole Africans from their homelands, put them through the unbelievable torment of the Middle Passage, erased their names, their languages, their cultures; sold their children away while forcing them to raise the children of others. Then emancipating them and telling them they were citizens, but with many of the rights of citizenship withheld from them.

Or even European-Americans, who seem to have it all within this culture, but who also lost the richness of their own ethnic identities through the lie of White Supremacy, which erases the distinctions of our ethnic heritages and tells us that the only aspect of our being that has any value is our skin color. Tells us that our only worth is in our supposed purity—purity that can only be guarded by never forming relationships with anyone else.

And here we each stand, now, in our individual islands of loneliness.

We are all like crumbs, torn from the larger loaf. Crumbs, left to dry and harden and be cast aside.

Just as Jesus started to cast aside the Canaanite woman, as someone separate from him. "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel," he says to his disciples as he turns away; but she, who would not be ignored, calls him back to his own full identity.

Before he can walk away, she runs and kneels in front of him, blocking his escape route. "Lord, help me," she says. And even when he answers, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs," She retorts, "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the children's table," and that's when he finally seems to see her. "Woman," he says, "great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

And, perhaps, so was he, Jesus—healed of the lingering messages of separation that had been so deeply embedded in his own psyche by all the assumptions of religion and culture.

Perhaps, in the end of that conversation, he finally realizes the significance of the beginning of that conversation: "Son of David," she had said. "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

This was more than just a polite way of addressing Jesus—this was a reminder to him of his own heritage. The very beginning of Matthew's Gospel contains a genealogy for Jesus—a genealogy that traces his spiritual roots back to David—hence, "Son of David." But it also traces David's roots back—to Ruth, to Tamar, to Rahab. Three Canaanite women, who were all ancestors of David. Three Canaanite women, whose blood was running in Jesus' own veins.

Even as Jesus says to the woman, "It isn't fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs," his very being embodies the truth that there is no real separation between those whom he is calling "children," and those whom he is calling "dogs."

Maybe Jesus had forgotten the stories that linked his story and his very existence to the woman who knelt in front of him. But in that moment, with her challenge, something within him awakened. He saw their connection. He saw the strength of her faith, and the demons that had tormented her child were cast out.

We know what it is to be possessed. Our demon is the lie of White Supremacy, our nation's twisting of history that has robbed us all of the knowledge of our

connections to one another. We speak of the Founding Fathers—white men; but that founding was built on the labor and culture of many others. Without Native Americans, we couldn't even tell you where we are—*Alabama, Tuscaloosa, Etowah*, so many of our place names come from the tribes who lived there, and they roll off our tongues like they were our own language—because they've become part of our language. Without the Africans who were brought here and enslaved, no southerner of any color would be able to eat—okra and watermelon, black-eyed peas and yams, all have their roots in Africa, but we claim them now as *our* foods because they are. They've become part of our common culture.

And if we pay the money and take the time to spit into a tube and send it off, we find out the complicated journey of our own gene pool—following it back step by step, generation by generation, crumb by crumb. And the farther back we go, the more those pathways begin to connect up with people we never heard of, never met, could have easily ignored or shunned. Only to discover that they are part of us, and we are part of them.

“Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table,” the Canaanite woman declared—but the point of this passage isn't for us all to get access to a few crumbs. The point is for us to reclaim the faith that leads us back to the whole loaf, the body of which we are all a part.

We need to follow the crumb trail backwards, so that we can finally move forward. Because once we discover that none of us is whole without the others, then, maybe this isolating syndrome, this deep loneliness that has infected and divided our nation, the church, and each one of us like a genetic defect that keeps emerging—maybe it can finally be healed; and the demon of racism that has possessed this nation can be cast out.

Maybe, if we have enough courage to take that journey of faith that our ancestors refused to face, then our children, like the daughter of that Canaanite woman, can finally be granted the mercy that has eluded us for so long. Maybe our children—all of our children of every color and background, and all the future generations leading forward, can finally be made whole.