



## SERMONS THAT WORK

**Pentecost 15**  
**Proper 18 (B)**

### **Crumbs for Healing**

**RCL: Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23; Psalm 125; James 2:1-10, [11-13], 14-17; Mark 7:24-37**

*“Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” (Mark 7:28)*

Today our challenging Gospel lesson gives us pause and stirs up questions like: Where is the Good News? What is the Good News? For whom is the Good News?

Jesus is on the move. He has crossed the border to the region of Tyre, into Gentile country. In the passages before our reading, Jesus declared the purity laws of the Pharisees null and void. He calls them to look past the words of the Law and tells them that nothing they eat can defile. In other words, Jesus is declaring all foods clean and says that it is what comes out of a person that defiles. Continuing, he explains that it is from our hearts that cruelty and meanness, bias and anger, indifference and arrogance come. So why do such hurtful words spurt from his mouth when the Syrophenician woman approaches, begging him to heal her daughter?

We believe and profess that Jesus is fully human and fully divine, and this week, we encounter Jesus in his full humanity. Why else would he be so rude and dismissive? Why would he respond to the Gentile woman’s plea with “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs?”

Our text makes it clear that Jesus wants to be left alone. Could it be that his spiritual well is dry, and he wants - needs – to replenish before continuing with his mission? After all, he postponed his retreat with his disciples to show compassion to the crowds, to feed the multitudes, to heal the sick and to free those possessed by demons. He has confronted the Pharisees and mentored his disciples. Perhaps Jesus is spiritually, physically, and emotionally depleted. Maybe he’s just plain exhausted and looking forward to a break.

But that was not to be. Like the crowds that followed him around, the Syrophenician woman found him. And this unnamed woman who comes to Jesus is obviously exhausted herself. Her daughter is demon-possessed, and we have learned from other gospel passages that the possessed lash out; they experience convulsions and tend to harm themselves as well as others. No one would want to invite them for dinner.

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This mother is exhausted and wants her child to be well – she needs a break. It is surprising that instead of showing compassion for this woman, Jesus speaks down to her.

For centuries, scholars have tried to explain away Jesus' words to this woman. Some believe that Jesus was testing the woman's faith while others wonder if Jesus was using the biases and entitlements of his day to teach the crowd a lesson. Still others propose that Jesus did not yet fully understand the scope of his mission. But truthfully, the people of that day would not have found Jesus' response to be out of the ordinary. Women were forbidden from approaching male strangers and speaking to them. Gentile women were especially to be ignored because they were perceived to be of an unclean race. There was probably no rabbi alive who would have even spoken to this woman. Yet Jesus did – even if in a demeaning way. When Jesus responds with, "Let the children be fed first," the woman does not question Jesus. As one commentator suggests, "She accepts the analogy and its implications, only pointing out that when the children are fed, the dogs also get some small benefit incidentally."

Why did Mark keep this story in his Gospel, especially since it portrays Jesus as one without compassion? Scholar Brian K. Blount believes Mark kept the story because the Syrophenician woman was a transformer, just like Jesus was. She does not break down, rather she does what Jesus is known for doing with all who question him. This woman accepts Jesus' response, stands up to the meaning of his response, and turns it upside down. And Jesus accepts instruction from this gendered outsider who challenges him. He allows her to school him in his own Good News. She succeeds in deconstructing his bias and entitlement and crosses the line he has drawn in the sand between them.

When Jesus says, "Let the children be fed *first*," some believe he is implying that the time is not right. He's not necessarily saying no, he is saying, "Not yet." Jesus seems to be suggesting that others may be fed in time, but for now his mission is to feed the Children of Israel. But this desperate mother is not leaving without her blessing. She has heard about Jesus – about his power – about his compassion – about his ability to make the impossible possible. She refused to believe that a loving and gracious God would not want all people to be filled – all people to be healed. So, this Jesus, who was not known for losing verbal contests, yields to her with these words: "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter."

He allows himself to be humbled and transformed. Barbara Brown Taylor describes the transformation in this way: "You can almost hear the huge wheel of history turning as Jesus comes to a new understanding of who he is and what he has been called to do." The woman's faith and persistence teach Jesus that his mission is much bigger than he had imagined, and she opened his eyes to the fact that God's love and mercy transcends all boundaries.

Some of us draw lines between ourselves and those we consider as "other". We sometimes place limits on what we can do and whom we can help. We are fearful of others who are not quite like us - never taking time to learn our neighbor's story. We make unconscious judgments each day about who deserves our help, our kindness, our attention, and even God's favor. It is easy for us to grow complacent about how we

treat the stranger and those who are different from us. The good news is that Jesus worked through his complacency and saw God's presence in this outsider.

There is no doubt that Mark sees Jesus' confrontation with the Syrophenician woman as a pivotal moment. He records that when Jesus leaves her after granting her request, he doesn't return home to his own people. He goes immediately to the Decapolis, a network of ten Greek cities, where he heals a deaf man with a speech impediment. Then Jesus feeds 4,000 Gentiles and has leftovers. This mother's persistence benefitted more than just her daughter. She was instrumental in jump-starting Jesus' ministry to all people.

Elisabeth Johnson reminds us that whatever we were before, whatever *people said we were, or we believed ourselves to be*, we are now the Children of God. If we identify with the Syrophenician woman begging for crumbs, we are reminded that Jesus does not leave any of us hungry, sick, and tired. Jesus claims us all as God's beloved children – children from every tribe and language and nation. Even crumbs from the table prove to be enough for our healing and salvation. But Jesus gives more than enough. He provides an abundant, life-giving feast for all. That, my friends, is the Good News.

As we journey through life, may we be aware of the Syrophenician women who exist within and outside of our communities. May we approach Jesus on their behalf and actively seek ways to bring about the well-being of those in need. May we strive to be Christ's hands and feet in this world, providing crumbs for healing. Amen.

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