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8/20/23, Matthew 15:21-28      “When Crumbs are Enough”

One day a desperate woman came to Jesus looking for help for her demon-possessed daughter. Presumably, she was a single mom. Otherwise, it would've been her husband who asked for help. She had a daughter tormented by a demon and she truly believed Jesus could help. She knew, deep down, he had power over demons. She was convinced that if anyone could help her, it would be him.

She repeatedly shouted, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David.” The text says, “But he did not answer her at all.” In other words, he ignored her. Now, if I were his PR person on that day, I would've sat Jesus down and said, “This is not your best look. The optics on this aren't good.” The big question is why would Jesus respond in a way that seemed so harsh?

Here's what I think. It might not be a satisfactory explanation, but I think it makes sense. According to the author of Matthew's Gospel, God had a plan. The plan was for salvation to be offered to every person of every tribe and every nation. That is to say the whole world was to know of God's redeeming love and to be offered a relationship with the God of all creation. Each and every nation was to be included in God's purposes.

However, according to Matthew, there was an order to God's plan. Salvation would be offered first to the Jews and then to the rest of the nations. It wasn't that God valued the Hebrew people more than anybody else. It was just that the story had to start somewhere. For whatever reason, God chose the Jewish people to be first.

A key for understanding God's plan, according to Matthew, is to know that during the entire earthly ministry of Jesus, his focus was on the Jewish people. It was their turn. That's why, in the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew, when Jesus sent out the disciples to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons, he said, “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” It wasn't the Gentile's turn.

It wasn't until after the first Easter that all the nations would be included. In the very last chapter of Matthew's Gospel, after the resurrection, Jesus tells his disciples, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and

of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.”

So, when Jesus ignored the woman in our story, it wasn’t because he didn’t care. She was a Gentile. He was simply sticking to the plan. It wasn’t that he didn’t love the Gentiles. It just wasn’t their time. It wasn’t their turn, according to the plan.

Of course, the situation did not end with Jesus ignoring her. After a while, the disciples came to Jesus urging him, and I paraphrase here, “Send her away. Her constant shouting is getting on our nerves.” That’s when Jesus denies her request. He told her, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” In other words, “God has a plan and I’m sticking to it.”

At this point, things go from bad to worse. She came and knelt before Jesus and pleaded, “Lord, help me.” By kneeling, she assumed a posture of worship. She was serious about this. However, in what can only be taken as an insult, Jesus responded, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

Every time I come across this story, I can’t help but think of those bracelets that used to be popular with the “WWJD?” – What would Jesus do? This story is an indication maybe we shouldn’t be too quick to assume we know what Jesus would do. Here, a desperate woman comes to him for help for her daughter. What did Jesus do? First, he ignored her. Next, he denied her. Then, he insulted her.

But after Jesus said, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs” something happened that changed everything. She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the masters’ table.” Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.”

I think that Gentile women demonstrated the power of faith. Faith isn’t just about believing things that are hard to believe. It’s not just a feeling. It’s trusting that God can act decisively in the world. Her trust literally moved Jesus. The power of her faith convinced Jesus to veer from God’s plan. Therefore, Matthew highlights her faith as the example of what “great faith” looks like.

I think any of us could, at times, be in that Canaanite woman’s position. When God seems silent, it can feel as though God is ignoring us. We might ask God for certain things and not get them. I always say there are three possible answers to our prayers: yes, no, and

wait. When we play the comparison game, when we compare what others have to what we have, it could seem as though God favors other people over ourselves.

Faith is trusting God can act on our behalf. “Great faith” keeps trusting even when it seems like there is no reason to do so. It means engaging with God in prayer, trusting our prayers are heard. And it means persevering in prayer, even when it doesn’t seem to be making a difference.

After the disciples failed to cure a young man of epilepsy, Jesus told his followers, “For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you (Matthew 17).”

Do you know why I feel good about coming to worship every Sunday? It’s because I look at all the problems in the world: environmental, warfare, gun violence, poverty, and deep down, I don’t think, alone, we can solve those problems. Worship is a lot of things. It’s community. It’s giving thanks. It’s also a way to kneel at the feet of Jesus and ask for help regarding problems we can’t solve ourselves. It demonstrates trust that God can act decisively in our lives.

The crux of our story comes at the end. When Jesus said, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs,” he meant it wouldn’t be right for him to take what was meant for the Hebrew people and give it to a Gentile, not in that moment. That wasn’t God’s plan.

In response, she conjured the image of a parent sharing bread with children at the dinner table. She said, “Yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the masters’ table.” That response showed that she understood that what Jesus had to offer was so holy and so powerful, all you need are crumbs.

She didn’t need a three-course meal. She didn’t need to stuff her face. She knew God’s grace was so powerful and so transformative, crumbs were enough. That woman had two strikes against her. She was a woman and she was a Gentile, but her faith led to a change in God’s plan. Her trust in the ability of Jesus to act decisively led to the healing of her daughter. That’s not just faith. That’s great faith!

I’ve shared with you that years ago I was diagnosed with prostate cancer. I don’t think I’ve shared with you my experience on the day of my surgery to have it removed. I

was prepared for the surgery and laying in a gurney against the wall opposite the doors of the operating room.

As I waited there, the doors opened and the operating team brought out the previous patient following his surgery. He didn't look to good. At that point, I was feeling pretty anxious. When you go in for surgery, you put your trust in a doctor. There's no avoiding it.

After everyone was gone, my doctor walked up to me and asked how I was doing. We spoke for a minute. Then, he said this. He said, "Right now, I'm going to the cafeteria and I'm going to have the same lunch I have every day when I do surgery. When I get back, we'll take you in and get underway."

At first, I wondered why he was sharing his lunch plans while I was about to experience the most traumatic event of my life. But I found myself starting to relax and realized he had just given me a crumb. It was just a tidbit of information, but it was enough to communicate to me that everything was going exactly the way it was supposed to go. He wasn't having a bad day. He wasn't so harried that he was going to have to skip lunch before performing my surgery. That crumb of information was all he needed.

There may be times when we don't understand God's plan. There may be times when it feels as though God is asleep at the wheel or that God is ignoring us. It might seem as though all we can hope for are crumbs that fall from the Master's table.

Faith is trusting that, regardless of the way things appear, God is so gracious and so powerful and so loving... all we need are the crumbs.

That's not just faith. That's great faith!