

Sacred Table Crumbs

Mark 7:24-30

Our passage today presents a very startling story. A foreign woman, a Greek Syrophenician woman, a foreign **non-Jewish** woman, had a conversation with Jesus. This is highly unusual for the time. Women did not talk to men, and especially a foreign woman did not talk to Jewish men. The original hearers would have immediately sat up and said, “What?” This woman not only talked to Jesus, she challenged him. And when Jesus dismissed her and then insulted her, she gently challenged Jesus again. But then, the most startling thing of all happened. But before we get to that, let us pray together.

E pule kākou, “Dear God of bread and sacred table crumbs, we thank you that everything and everyone you create is sacred and beloved, even the crumbs and the dogs. Open our eyes to the sacredness of all blessings that fall on our floor. Amen.”

Our passage today presents a troubling and insulting response by Jesus to a woman asking for help. I have read many commentaries and studies on this passage. Some of them try to soften the fact that Jesus responded to this woman by calling her a dog. But I am most intrigued by interpretations of this story that try to get underneath the harsh words of Jesus to begin to understand what is going on.

We have spent the last month talking about bread, and the various symbols of bread in the Gospels as they relate to Jesus, the Bread of Life. Most of these bread symbols were placed in the context of God’s profound abundance. Here, again, we have another bread symbol, but this time, the bread story is about just the crumbs that fall to the ground and are eaten by the dogs: the leftovers. Whatever is left in those baskets that were gathered after the feeding of the 5000. Whatever is left over after God’s family has eaten—the stuff we sweep up and toss away. You know, the leftover leftovers. And our story teaches us that even the leftover leftovers are sacred. **But it isn’t Jesus who teaches this.** It is our friend, the foreign Greek Syrophenician woman.

This is one of my favorite Bible stories because Jesus is fully human here. A woman comes up to him while he was trying to get away and escape notice. He was wiped out and needed a vacation. This foreigner comes up and begs Jesus to cast a demon from her daughter. I am amazed at the courage of this woman who pushes through all of the cultural and social taboos and boldly approaches Jesus asking for help for her daughter. All of you who are mothers and fathers know of this depth of this love; the love that will do whatever it takes to help our children. This woman presses on pushed by the strongest force in the universe, the love of a mother for her sick child. Anyone here ever feel this love?

The woman asks for help, and Jesus says, “Sure!” Is that what he said? No. He said, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” This is a pretty startling reply from Jesus. Let’s look closely. Who are the children Jesus is referring to? That is right, the Children of Israel, the Jews. Jesus tells her, look, I’m a Jewish prophet with a Jewish God and this is Jewish bread you are asking for. And then Jesus adds, it is not fair to take the Jewish bread and throw it to the foreign dogs. Jesus says, these are Jewish bread blessings you are asking for, and it isn’t fair to give them to you, a foreigner, a dog. Yes. Jesus calls

her a dog. Now the Greek here is not polite. The Greek is not a pretty word for dog, but a mean street word for dog that rhymes with itch.

But this woman lovingly responds, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Can you feel the passion and compassion in this woman? She has just been deeply insulted, called a foreigner **and a dog**, and she responds, Sir. Politely. But still pressing toward her goal of love, and she responds in complete ha'aha'a, humility. Sir, I will even eat your crumbs.

But now, the most startling thing of all in our passage. Jesus hears her, **and changes his mind**. This foreign dog woman changes Jesus' heart. And in this moment, in this close dialogue between Jesus and a foreign woman, **Jesus changes everything**. His mission changes from ministering to the nation of Israel to ministering to all of humanity (that's you and I!), from hosting the Jewish table of God to hosting the table of God, crumbs and all, for **everyone** forever.

Jesus' heart was changed by a mother who loved her daughter so much that she challenged Jesus. Jesus' heart was **changed by love**.

There is so much to be learned from this small story. Jesus was exhausted and in a foreign land and cranky. He had a conversation with yet another woman who wanted help. He was so tired, and just wanted to be alone. And yet this mother reminded Jesus of the spirit of aloha that binds all of us as human beings together, and she changed Jesus' heart. And her faith and tenacity and gentle perseverance led Jesus to heal her daughter, and tell her so right on the spot.

Another lesson here is that even Jesus learned and changed his mind. Even Jesus grew. Even Jesus spoke in dialogue with a stranger and learned and changed and was open to new ideas. **Now this may come as a shock, but if Jesus can change, so can...um, you.** And what was the catalyst of change? What force was so huge that it changed the heart of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords? [pause] Love. The tenacity and perseverance of a mother's love. Love changes everything.

We will soon join together at this table to eat the bread of heaven, the bread of life, and share the cup of love together. We are blessed that God offers us this bread of blessing in grace and abundance. But what about our leftover leftover crumbs today? What about the overflowing cup of abundance that is in your life, and in my life, and in our lives? Are there strangers in your life who you deem not good enough to come to this table? Are there foreigners in your life who are not good enough to eat at God's table with you? Are there people you know who could be saved by even the leftover leftovers from this table set before us? Who is God waiting for and asking **you** to feed with the bread of Heaven? When you take the bread today, break off a crumb and hold it in your hand. Ask God who or what needs this crumb. Even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs. How are you to serve Jesus by being his hands and feet in the world, and whom should **you** feed? Jesus said, "Feed my sheep." I think he meant it. Amen.