

A Crumby Faith
Pastor Robin Wells

In today's scripture lesson we meet Jesus as he is traveling. And so it seems most appropriate on this Rally Sunday, that we take some time to catch up with Jesus, so to speak—to see what he has been up to. In the passage before this the Jewish Pharisees and scribes had come from Jerusalem to meet and even challenge this wandering Jewish rabbi. Jesus finally gets fed up with them, calling them hypocrites. He even quotes the prophet Isaiah saying, "This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines." ' It seems as though he could use a vacation from being the Son of God. The trouble is, the Son of God does not take vacation. And I say that Jesus should take a break because I am a human being and I know what it's like to be worn out from the demands of other people, and how important it is to rest and recharge.

However, when I say that Jesus should take a vacation, I'm just as bad as the Pharisees and scribes seeing Jesus through my very limited human perspective. And yet. . .I am reminded in this scripture today of one of the age old doctrines of the Church that says Jesus, the Messiah, Son of God, is both fully human and fully divine. It is one of those many paradoxes of the Christian faith. And it's a teaching of the church we are invited into today through Jesus's encounter with the Syrophoenecian woman and through a man who is deaf and tongue-tied.

We see the encounter with the Syrophoenecian woman in one other Gospel text, in Matthew 15, and it is there that we get more detail as to what is going on in this interaction. Here is Jesus, a stranger in a strange land just passing through with some other guys who are his disciples. Jesus intends to simply pass through this land of the Gentiles on to a land populated by Jews where he can continue to be in mission to the Israelites, God's chosen people, but not before he takes some time to hide out for a little while in a region where he should be relatively unknown. The thing is, His ministry has grown in popularity and Jesus is becoming known as this rockstar miracle worker in circles beyond the immediate confines of Judaism.

So like a rockstar, Jesus tries to hide out in an undisclosed location, but the Syrophoenecian woman tracks him down anyway. She is not Jewish, and not only is there an ethnic and a cultural divide between this woman and Jesus, she's a woman and he's a man, and typically, due to the segregation between men and women in this time, there would be no reason for these two to interact with one another. We might look at this scenario and say, this is really weird and even stalker-like. A clear violation of boundaries is happening here.

However, God still has a way of working when boundaries are crossed. In the Matthew text, we get a clearer picture as to how she approaches Jesus. It's not just with begging, but with shouting! She yells: 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.' This statement from this inappropriate woman is a lot for you and I to unpack: Where is this daughter? What is this demon like? How does this woman know her daughter has a demon? Do I even believe in demons?

And the weird thing is (and we see this more in the Matthew text than in Mark): Jesus just ignores her. The woman calls after Jesus and he simply does not answer her at first. And his disciples who are essentially Jesus's entourage say to Jesus, get rid of her. 'Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.'

You know what? I don't think this is Jesus's finest moment. You'll have some preachers say, "Oh Jesus was just testing the woman's faith; and he was going to help her all along. He was just proving a point to the disciples. . ." I don't think so. I think this is an example of Jesus being influenced by the society of his time and place. It is Jesus being so very human and so very prejudiced, and so very narrowminded—Jesus is doing that same thing he had accused the Pharisees of earlier. And we are to take notice of that.

And you know what? As a disciple of Jesus Christ, I am just as guilty of tuning out those in need. I live a comfortable life. It's much easier to love people who are more like me, than it is to love people who are different from me. It's very easy for me to turn off news reports and simply ignore the fact that nations tread on the soil of other nations; that religious divisions continue to incite war; that deadly diseases become epidemics on other continents; that people of color are not safe walking in their own neighborhoods; that the children of the world suffer the demons that our societies place upon them.

I can ignore these things like you wouldn't believe. . . I can ignore **these** people like you wouldn't believe. . . Because really, they aren't **these** people, but they are **those** people through our "other-ing and our fear." In the Matthew text, Jesus tells **that** woman who is nothing like him: 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' And that woman is non-Jewish, a Gentile. A woman for whom Jesus has no responsibility nor obligation to. **That** woman is **not** his problem. And the woman's daughter? Not His problem either. And that woman prays the most simple and most effective prayer I have ever known. She says: "Lord, help me." And yet, that is not enough. Jesus in his full humanity measures whether or not this woman is deserving of His mercy and grace.

And this is where we get to the common ground of the Mathew and Mark versions of this episode in Jesus's ministry. He says: 'It isn't right to take the children's bread and feed it to the dogs.' But the thing is, when injustice is perpetuated, when people have had enough, when women and men stand up for their human dignity, Things change. God's grace and mercy are very much at work in the world. Even for those whom

society calls dogs. This dog of a woman hounds Jesus for what she desperately needs in her life. She demands to be heard. She demands to be seen. She demands that you and I and Jesus and the disciples claim her and her daughter as beloved children of God.

She says with the smallest crumb of faith, 'Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.' This woman has pleaded her case before Jesus, son of God and Son of Man. Maybe she is a Gentile dog in His human eyes, maybe she is not worthy, but she hounds Him for the meager crumbs of mercy and grace. Jesus may have been hounded by the scribes and Pharisees, but this is the woman who argues with Jesus and wins. When Jesus finally sees this woman through God's eyes, not only is this woman redeemed, but so is her daughter, and so is Jesus. I cannot begin to know the kind of demon that tormented the child of this woman. I do not know if this child was depressed, oppressed, possessed, or dispossessed. . . . But the scripture tells us, that through the parent's faith, the child is healed. Brothers, sisters, parents, aunts, uncles, teachers, guides, and mentors: Know that your great faith can bring healing. Know that your great faith can cast out demons. Know that your great faith can change the world. Because a parent's faith can change even Jesus who wanted to be closed-off not only for his own self-preservation but because he thought he was limited in what God wanted to do through him!

The Syrophenecian woman changes Jesus. She opens him up to not only the possibility of sharing the gospel beyond the children of Israel, but she opens him up to an entirely new mission field. If you have ever served others in the name of Jesus, you know that the experience not only changes the situation and circumstances for others, but it changes you too. And so Jesus, having experienced this transformative thing through a person who is so very unlike him, he is now even more open to the possibility that the kingdom of God is at hand for everyone.

When Jesus has an inward change of heart, he opens the door to even more miraculous work through the Holy Spirit. Notice that in this passage from Mark, the woman opens her mouth so Jesus can open his heart in ways that allow him to open up the deaf and mute man to speak and hear.

And yet, Jesus asks the disciples to stay silent about all this. Shut it. Clam up. Keep this secret to yourselves that Jesus really is the Messiah—the anointed one from God. This happens over and over again in the Gospel of Mark. Jesus tells people not to tell others of the extraordinary things God has done through him. And yet they do. As it says in the text, "The more he tried to silence them, the more eagerly they shared the news."

One crumb of faith is sometimes the only thing that is needed to sustain the faith that expands into the bread of life feeding many more than just ourselves. We don't always know how to speak up, and we don't always know when to hold our tongue. But if we follow the bread crumbs of faith, God will lead us to the margins of our own hearts and we will be changed. Lives will be changed. Families will be changed. Communities will be changed.

I hope that we can be vessels for the crumbs of faith we find this week. I hope that we have eyes to see the other as the same. I hope we have ears opened to receive a word like it is manna from heaven. I hope for twisted tongues to be released to speak love that is true, and wondrous, and can no longer be silenced.

Let it be so. Amen.