

Leftovers

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Leftovers. In our home, as I am sure it is in yours, the word “leftover” conjures up childhood nightmares of re-heated pork chops, gooey noodle casseroles, and mystery containers of Tupperware. Leftovers. Hardly ever exciting, sometimes barely palatable. Today’s pot roast is tomorrow’s beef stew. Until it is finally determined that yes, we got our money’s worth out of that seven pound cut of meat. The rest is either thrown away or given to the family dog.

In our Gospel reading for today, Jesus is approached by a Canaanite (Gentile) woman. Canaanites were considered “unclean” by Jews. As it happened, the woman’s daughter was possessed by a demon. And she takes it upon herself to approach the one whose reputation as a great healer precedes him. This unnamed woman recalls the wonderful quote from Laural Thatcher Ulrich: *“Well behaved women seldom make history.”*

Jesus, at first, refuses her request. “It’s not right to take bread out of children’s mouths and throw it to dogs.” In other words, Jesus is saying that his mission on earth was to a select group of people, whom he often referred to as his “children.” Therefore, it is not fair for an outsider, a “dog” to demand attention at the expense of those whom Jesus came to minister. Much has been written and argued about the tone and intent of Jesus’ words. His brusque tone with this unnamed woman contradicts our ideas about gentle Jesus, meek and mild. Maybe he was having a bad day, maybe he jests with this woman. We can’t be sure.

What we do know is that the woman does not take Jesus’ insult lightly. She cleverly retorts, “You’re right, Master, but beggar dogs do get scraps from the master’s table.” The woman is not looking for a three-course meal. Or even a loaf of bread. She understands that all her daughter requires from this healer is just a small fragment of his attention. This woman’s faith in Jesus is that he is so powerful that she believes even the “crumbs” he offers can be a nutritious meal. All she is seeking are leftovers—surely that would not distract Jesus from his mission and purpose.

The Christian church, including our own congregation here in Topeka, tends to experience the same kind of tunnel vision exhibited by Jesus. We know we are called to minister to the world, and yet, finite resources often dictate to whom we minister. When it comes to feeding, we work to ensure the people in the pews are fed first; after all, they are the ones who keep the lights on and the air conditioning running. That’s not to say there isn’t compassion for others; it’s just that we are often content to feed ourselves first, when we know we have abundance, and offer any surplus to the outsiders.

But every week, we are approached by Canaanite women and men who are in need of healing or sometimes, just a tank of gas. And we are left with a choice: visit with them or let them go on their way. After all, what most people need are just a few crumbs...

One Bible commentary points out: “This encounter with Jesus reminds us that there is no one outside the circle of God’s love and compassion. As Jesus walks the roads from Galilee to Jerusalem, people of all descriptions draw near him and follow him. Righteous people criticize him

for eating with sinners, lepers, and tax collectors. As his new fellowship spreads into the Roman world, Jews and Gentiles do the unheard-of thing of sitting down together and acting like brothers and sisters. The height, breadth, and depth of God's compassion still trouble some people within the church today. Those who operate out of a mentality of scarcity, fear, or suspicion say that there must be limits. They act as if God's grace is not for everyone. They think that there is not enough to go around."¹

Sometimes it appears as if there is not enough to go around. We look in our cupboards and find only five loaves, we peek in the fridge and see only two fish, and we wonder how such a small fare could possibly feed a crowd of five, let alone five thousand. But just a chapter earlier in Matthew, we see what Jesus cooks up for a staggering crowd—plenty to go around, **with leftovers, besides!**

The good news of Jesus is for everyone. In his conversation with the Canaanite woman, Jesus' eyes were opened to just how expansive his ministry could be. And Jesus himself realized that all are called to receive the bread and sit at the table. No longer shall anyone feast upon mere crumbs. Whenever we seek to feed those with the bread of life, the Spirit will always make sure that the bread is there, in abundance, so that everyone can feast to their heart's content. As one theologian reminds us, "At the Lord's Table, there is enough food for all. When Jesus feeds the multitudes in the wilderness, there is an abundance left over. Grace abounds for all."²

Let us pray.

Dear God, help us remember that you are a God of abundance, not of scarcity, and that in your presence, all are fed. Amen.

¹ Jarvis, Cynthia A. (2013-12-09). Feasting on the Gospels--Matthew, Volume 2 (Kindle Locations 1469-1474). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

² Jarvis, Cynthia A. (2013-12-09). Feasting on the Gospels--Matthew, Volume 2 (Kindle Locations 1465-1466). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.