

# *Crumbs from the Table*

By  
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from the pulpit of  
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Isaiah 25:1-8

O LORD, you are my God; I will exalt you, I will praise your name; for you have done wonderful things, plans formed of old, faithful and sure. <sup>2</sup>For you have made the city a heap, the fortified city a ruin; the palace of aliens is a city no more, it will never be rebuilt. <sup>3</sup>Therefore strong peoples will glorify you; cities of ruthless nations will fear you. <sup>4</sup>For you have been a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress, a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat. When the blast of the ruthless was like a winter rainstorm, <sup>5</sup>the noise of aliens like heat in a dry place, you subdued the heat with the shade of clouds; the song of the ruthless was stilled.

<sup>6</sup>On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. <sup>7</sup>And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. <sup>8</sup>Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken.

## Mark 7:24-29

<sup>24</sup> From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, <sup>25</sup> but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. <sup>26</sup> Now the woman was a gentile, of Syrophoenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. <sup>27</sup> He said to her, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” <sup>28</sup> But she answered him, “Sir,<sup>l</sup> even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” <sup>29</sup> Then he said to her, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.”

In seminary, I took a class from Dr. Clifton Black on the gospel of Mark. He's one of the world's leading scholars on Mark, the oldest and shortest account we have of the life of Jesus. He dared us to write a sermon about this complex passage in that class. So I, of course, wrote my senior sermon on it.

We begin our story with a Jesus who desperately doesn't want to be noticed in the non-Jewish/Gentile Territory of Tyre. "The references to Tyre, Syrophenicia, Sidon, and [later] the Decapolis are important: Jesus is traversing Gentile territory," where the Jews are despised.<sup>1</sup> He was likely tired and in deep need of some introvert time.

But, as usual, Jesus could not escape notice. A gentile, a Syrophenician, a person of different ethnicity, history, race, and faith, and a woman, quite unconventional for antiquity, comes to Jesus and pleads with him to heal her daughter.

Yet, Jesus responds rather coldly, rather rudely, rather well, not Christlike. He says, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." When he says, "Let the children be fed first," he is referring to the Jews, the people of which he is a member and for whom he came to be the Messiah, the people whose land he is not currently on. It's almost like Jesus says here, in exhausted exasperation, "I'm not here for you! I'm here for *my* people."

The literal Greek translation of what he said to her would sound more like, "permit first to be satisfied the children, for it is not good to take the bread of the children and cast it to the dogs." And he definitely, problematically, calls this Gentile woman and her daughter dogs. This term "dogs" would've been a racial slur in his day; calling any Gentile, but particularly a Syrophenician woman, a dog was an insult of the highest order.

I don't know about you, but this is not how I expect my Jesus to act. Exclusionary? Rude? Yet that's what we have in this story.

But then, this brilliant Gentile woman responds, "Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

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<sup>1</sup> C. Clifton Black, *Working Preacher*

Did she just call out Jesus? Did a Gentile woman, perhaps, actually teach Jesus something in this story? That God's love and healing might be for all people, not just the "chosen ones?" Did she just turn his insult to her into a commentary on well, dogs?

While dogs weren't seen in a very favorable light by the Jews at this time, who saw them as scavengers who ate unclean food,<sup>2</sup> the Gentiles had a different understanding of dogs – closer to how we understand dogs now.

Our summer series, *All Creatures Great and Small*, easily lends itself to this topic, this topic that I happen to love and adore, as do all of my pastoral colleagues at BMPC – the topic, of dogs.

Did you know there are more dogs on this campus than pastors? All of the pastors at BMPC have dogs—there are two Sophies (Frank has one and Kirby another), a Loona, a St. Basil, and I, being the ever-excessive youth pastor, have two, Otis Redding and Hildegard of Bingen.

When my wife, Jenni, and I first met, I didn't know I was a dog person. That was until I met our Otis. He's a terrier rescue mutt who is now 13 and fulfills every expectation you might have of a crotchety old boy-dog. He is smelly, lumpy, limpy, as one of his back legs is shorter than the other, and he tends to bark at whoever comes to the door. While there are worse dogs out there, Otis is no angel. He will steal pizza from off the coffee table and taught his little sister, Hildy, how to dig in the trash.

And yet, Otis is maybe one of my favorite little beings on the planet. He is inconvenient. He is loud. He is whiney. And yet, Jenni and I just adore him, so much so that we got another dog, Hildy. And much like in our story today, I've witnessed my fair share of teenagers sneak food to them when they think I'm not looking, particularly at the Sunday Morning Brunches we have for youth in September and October. I recall one year a teenager snuck four pieces of bacon to Otis under the table before I realized what was happening and stepped in to stop it before Otis got sick.

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<sup>2</sup> Boring, M. Eugene, *Mark: A Commentary*, p. 212

Turns out humans have been in relationships with dogs for a long time, for millennia. The earliest humans found a predator in the gray wolf, but eventually, its descendants were domesticated because of a wolf's desire for food and, I assume, the human impulse to pet that which is cute. In Egypt, one dog was mummified with its owner, and from as long as 16,000 years ago,<sup>3</sup> we have evidence of dogs being buried like humans as a sign of love and respect, even dogs being buried with their humans in later times.

Jesus calls this woman a dog, and she responds, saying, sure, but even dogs get the crumbs from the Table. Sometimes, they even get more than the crumbs. Sometimes, when dogs are beloved, they get yummy bits of food from their owners or their visitors, particularly if those owners are children, just like Otis got bacon from kids at my house.

This woman demands inclusion, and Jesus cannot help but say, well, okay. I guess you're right. Your daughter is healed. And the woman returns to a healthy daughter.

This passage is the one story in scripture we have of Jesus being, well, corrected, of Jesus learning. Of Jesus being really, *really* human. And who does it happen with? A Gentile woman who demands healing for her daughter. A Gentile woman and her Gentile daughter.

Dogs do not have a good reputation when it comes to the Hebrew Scriptures, yet this woman knows that, to *many*, dogs are precious. It's almost like she's responding with, dogs are awesome! And those children who you think you're here for, the Jews, they include me, they include my daughter. God loves me, too.

Dr. Clifton Black, that scholar I mentioned at the beginning who I learned from at Princeton, says of this interaction, "though listeners of the story may have been entertained by it, Jesus is more than conceding to the witty moxie of a female outsider; [so much so that] he ratifies her claim to the gospel..."<sup>4</sup>

Another scholar discusses how "Mark seems to go out of the way to present Jesus learning from a Gentile woman in a Gentile place about the inclusivity of God's

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<sup>3</sup> PBS Eons, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nDt0HKsRRw>

<sup>4</sup> C. Clifton Black, *Working Preacher*

realm.”<sup>5</sup> In a place where Jesus does not belong, with a woman who is different from him in all the ways that count, Jesus learns that God's love is bigger than he first anticipated.

So, what does this story of Jesus learning, of a woman who countenances a slur against her and turns it back against Jesus, this story of a young girl's healing, have to do with us?

Firstly, I believe it teaches us that if Jesus, our savior, the most perfect human ever to exist, had a problematic relationship with ethnicity and race and difference, we sure as goodness are going to need to come to those issues with, in a word, humility. The issues of race, ethnicity, and difference require in us humility.

On this Fourth of July weekend, when we celebrate the glory of the United States independence from a tyrannical government, freedom from taxation without representation, freedom to form a more perfect union, perhaps we also need to remember our more painful history when it comes to living up to our highest ideals of "life, liberty, and justice for all." When those words were first written, they were only written about successful land-owning white men, not to mention cis-gendered and straight.

Maybe we have more to learn from this story than we are quite comfortable with as US Americans, particularly on this Fourth of July weekend when patriotism is on rampant display.

While the US was founded on truly beautiful principles, we have failed to live up to them time and again, especially when it comes to people of different races, ethnicities, abilities, sexualities, or genders, or any difference that so easily divides us. The US has oppressed Black and Brown people since the inception of this country, let alone women, let alone LGBTQ+ folks, let alone native people. And each of us, in our own ways, is complicit in the systems of oppression, no matter what identity politics we play.

It's as though we've given different people groups crumbs from the Table rather than the whole meal. When I think about the glory of the Emancipation Proclamation that brought enslaved Black Americans freedom, I cannot help but

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<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Sturthers Malbon, "The Gospel of Mark," in *Women's Biblical Commentary*

think about the later Jim Crow laws that profoundly and deeply oppressed people of African descent in this country. Sure, Black Americans were freed, but they couldn't vote, or well... folks had to pass a reading test in order to vote... that was unless you were white, in which case you were "grandfathered into voting," whether or not you could read. I think about our histories of redlining, gerrymandering, and white flight.

In another complicated example, it has been legal for me to be married to my wife for nine years. Just nine years. It wasn't until 2015 that my marriage was deemed legal across the land. But now, children's books about families that include those with two moms or two dads or other LGBTQ+ characters are censored across the nation. Trans people are under attack. The ACLU is currently tracking 527 anti-LGBTQ bills in the US.

Two steps forward and three steps back.

For so long, I thought, because of my sexuality, that I wouldn't be welcome at the Table of God, that I wasn't one of the children who Jesus came to save. Because of a handful of verses, I thought I, along with all my LGBTQ+ siblings, hadn't earned the mercy and love of God.

While our country fights about my right to exist as a Queer person in the world, while it argues about Native American rights, trans issues, racism, immigration, and all issues of difference – Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church brought me to the Table. The Church Universal wanted to give me crumbs, but you, Bryn Mawr, said, "No, she's invited to the Table. We have a spot for her."

Today is my last sermon to you before I leave for the Pacific Northwest to become the solo pastor of a church in Washington. I pray you know that this church will never leave my heart, as it is the place that declared, loud enough for all to hear, that I was a beloved child of God, that I was good enough, wise enough, and loving enough to support our teenagers for the past five years as they grew into the people God created them to be.

For all the ways we fail, I believe we are moving, at least in this place, in the right direction. This past year, the anti-racism committee worked together to write an incredible statement on Belonging and Inclusion, the last line of which says, "Glory

be to God, who created everyone equal in God's image, to Jesus Christ, who broke down the walls that divide us, and to the Holy Spirit, who encourages us to work together for justice, freedom, and peace."

So, friends, as you enter this week, this month, this year, this life, I challenge you to remember the Syrophoenician woman who debated Jesus into healing her daughter. May we be open to the Syrophoenician women in our own lives, that we might work for justice, peace, and reconciliation for all people.

For God's love is, as our VBC kids learned a couple weeks ago, "high and wide and long and deep," and more glorious than we can ever imagine. Kind of like the love a dog has for their owner, every time they come home.

In the name of the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Sustainer.

Amen.