

Twelfth Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/A): "Cringe-worthiness and Crumbs"
Matthew 15:21-28
August 15-16, 2026
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Cringe-worthy. That's how I'd describe Jesus' response to the Canaanite woman in today's Gospel. First Jesus ignores her plea for help, even though she addresses Him as "*Lord, Son of David,*" and **begs** for mercy because her "*daughter is tormented by a demon*" (Matt. 15:22). 'Seems like that need would be right up Jesus' alley. Yet St. Matthew reveals, "*... he did not answer her at all.*" Then when she persists, He smacks her down with these memorable words: "*It's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.*" (Matt. 15:26) Let's compare it to another story St. Matthew tells, about another pagan who begs Jesus to heal someone he cares about deeply. It's in Matthew 8:5-13. A Roman soldier, a centurion, beseeches Jesus to heal his servant. Jesus' immediate response? "*I will come and cure him.*" (Matt. 8:7) Now **that's** what we like to hear! A Jesus **anxious, at-the-ready**, to erase suffering, mend what is broken, make sick people well and injured people whole, ever-responsive, bending His ear and extending a healing hand to us and our loved ones.

That's what we long for and hopefully **have** experienced from our Lord, but can we also identify with the woman's experience that Jesus initially "*... did not answer her at all*"? Haven't we all pleaded with God for one thing or another and only heard echoing silence as God's response? There's a poem by Emily Dickinson (#376) that captures that sense of divine abandonment really well:

Of Course -- I prayed --
And did God Care?
He cared as much as on the Air
A Bird -- had stamped her foot --
And Cried -- "Give Me" --

That's how I felt when I prayed my heart out for my sister's healing from cancer, and she died anyway, leaving 2 small children, like my mother had died, leaving my sisters and me.

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It's so interesting that this Canaanite woman, this mother, is interceding for her daughter, yet she cries to Jesus, "*Have mercy on **me**,*" then falls on her knees before Him and sobs, "*Lord, help **me**.*" She loves her child so much that her daughter's torment is her own. She doesn't just **witness** her child's pain, she **feels** it, to her core. The demon has dragged them **both** into a living hell. She will do anything, bear any insult, risk any punishment to access care and find healing for her child.

At the beginning of the story, why is the woman **shouting** at Jesus, "*Have mercy on me*"? It's not because He's hard of hearing. It's because she is at a distance from Him, knowing that Jesus, a Jewish male, would consider her, a Gentile female, unclean. She's not going to do anything to alienate Him when she has a favor to ask. But when He doesn't answer her, she **risks** it, she crosses that invisible boundary, violates His personal space, and falls on her knees before Him. "*Lord, help me.*" We'd expect Jesus' next words to hit her like a body blow: "*It's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.*" But she is **not** stunned speechless. She remains humble and entirely **self**-possessed on behalf of her **demon**-possessed daughter as she pushes back, "*Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.*" (Matt. 15:27)

There's a beautiful little book called *A Tree Full of Angels: Seeing the Holy in the Ordinary*, that includes a chapter called, "The Prayer of a Woman Who Understood Crumbs." The author Macrina Wiederkehr writes:

...in a world such as ours where everyone wants the biggest and the best, it does seem a bit unusual to meet someone who is willing to be saved, healed, and fed just with crumbs.¹

In a way, the Roman centurion was fine with crumbs, too. He insisted Jesus didn't need to inconvenience Himself by traveling to his home and laying hands on his servant. He understood that Jesus' desire to heal the man was enough. Having Jesus, the Great Physician, make a house call would have been the whole loaf, but crumbs were more than enough.

In *A Tree Full of Angels* we read:

The woman's daughter had a demon. What kind of demon I really don't know, but we are all acquainted with demons, aren't we? Sometimes [always??] they are more subtle than the Devil in person. They are those things that clutch at us, strangle us, force us to obey them. They control us with great delight, and finally they own us. Demons are certainly as much around today as they were in Jesus' day. They are more subtle, perhaps, and so we think we have outgrown them. Because we call them by other names, we have a way of missing them. But there is still a great force surrounding us that tries to push us into what is not of God. Watch out for these demons. If a friend, a daughter, a sister or brother of yours has a demon, or if the demon is your own, by all means go to the Lord. Insist that the demon be cast out.¹

Insist. The Canaanite woman is a spiritual sister of the fictional widow in Jesus' parable (Luke 18:1-8) who is described as "importunate," not a word I've ever heard except in that story. If we're **importunate**, it means we believe our cause is so important, we're so passionate about it, that we hang onto it like a bulldog and will not let it go. The importunate widow believes her cause is just, is incensed by the **in**justice of her situation, so she camps out at a judge's door to plead her case. He's acting like no one's home, but she knows he's in there and she just about bloodies her knuckles pounding on that door and insisting he open up to her. Eventually he does. Ultimately she receives the justice she seeks.

The Canaanite woman, like **many** parents, is ready and willing to go to the mat for her daughter. She's more than willing to ask a Jew to heal her little girl, even though there's been a long, troubled, homicidal history between Canaanite and Jews. We've seen how she's more willing to **ask** than Jesus is to **answer** – to answer at all, no less in the affirmative. She is willing to create a scene, to plunge to her knees, to suck it up and absorb insult, to save her daughter. We know so little about her, but what we **do** know is stunning: she probably loves her daughter more than her own life, which is something Jesus could really relate to, since He is on His way to Jerusalem to give His life for us.

In my book, this woman changes Jesus' mind. This encounter pushes Him way beyond His human comfort zone, makes Him move a boundary between Jew and Gentile that had been set in stone for centuries. In 5 verses Jesus travels a huge spiritual distance, bridges a Grand Canyon-sized gap, going from *"I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel"* to *"Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish."* (Matt. 15: 24, 28) If Jesus had met this Canaanite woman **before** the Roman centurion came to ask healing for his servant, Jesus might have said of **her**, *"Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith."* (Matt. 8:10c)

This magnificent story of maternal devotion, unflappable faith, enduring hope, unflagging love and inspiring persistence makes me ask of myself and you: is there a situation in my life, in your life, that is calling for more chutzpah, more boldness, more courage, more faith, hope and love than we have yet brought to bear? Amen

¹Macrina Wiederkehr, *A Tree Full of Angels: Seeing the Holy in the Ordinary* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1988), p. 42.

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