

The Crumbs

Imagine the scene: A healer makes his way through the crowded streets of a dusty town. People press close to him, holding up withered limbs, hoping for a touch that will cure their trembling legs, bring light back into their lightless eyes. The healer is new, they've heard, but he's good – he has a power that's rumoured to come straight from God. When a woman comes out and starts shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon", it seems, at first, as just more noise added to an already overloud scene. Anyhow, it doesn't matter - Jesus doesn't answer her at all. He ignores her, even as she gets closer, even as the disciples look at each other helplessly and finally, tired of her shouts, embarrassed by her boldness, ask Jesus to send the woman away.

It's a strange scene, a jarring passage to read because the Jesus of this passage does not sound like the Jesus we think we know. In the Gospels, I can't find any other story where Jesus does not respond to someone who asks for help; this may be the only passage where Jesus ignores someone in need. Even when he listens, it only gets worse; he refuses to heal the woman's daughter, telling her that he was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel. Does that sound like Jesus to you? Did He actually refuse to help her just because she is a Gentile? But he's helped Gentiles before – think about the Centurion, who appealed to Jesus on behalf of his servant. Jesus listened to him and granted his wish. If there had ever been a time for discrimination, that would have been it – to show the powerful Roman officer, a Gentile, whose kingdom it *really* was, who *really* had the power. But Jesus said to him immediately, "I will come and cure your servant". So what's the difference between the two Gentiles? Why didn't Jesus tell the other Gentile that He was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel? Was it because the Centurion had more power, was it because he was a man, or was it because Jesus simply forgot to say His mission statement to the centurion? How are we supposed to understand today's story? How can we reconcile this exclusive Jesus with the inclusive Jesus, who is known to us so well?

Throughout the Gospels, it is evident that Jesus' mission was initially to save God's chosen people, the children of Israel. For example, Jesus sent his disciples out with the following instructions: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, 'the kingdom of heaven has come near'." I think it is an irony that such good news excludes certain people, even if it is

strategic. If Gentiles heard about his instruction, they could have said “if you don’t include us, then it’s not good news anymore; it’s bad news for us” As it turned out, however, people kept coming to Jesus regardless of their backgrounds. Jesus and his disciples might not have entered any Gentile cities to spread the good news, but nothing could prevent the Gentiles from coming to see Jesus. They heard about Jesus, and knew about him by word of mouth. The Gospel of Mark reports in Mark 3:8 that a great multitude came to see Jesus from many places, including Tyre and Sidon, home of the Canaanite woman in today’s story. It was not easy for Gentiles to come out to see Jesus, because they had to deal with racial prejudice among the people of Israel. It was even harder for the Canaanite woman as she was a triple outsider on account of her gender, her ethnicity, and her family situation; she was a mother of a demon-possessed daughter.

No wonder the disciples did not talk to her personally; instead, they asked Jesus to send her away. And Jesus clarified the boundary between the people of Israel and this foreigner, calling his people children, and her a dog – a name that his fellow Jews routinely gave to Gentiles. He was a Jew after all, and this story confirms that Jesus was fully immersed in that cultural context. Likewise, the writers of the four Gospels lived in different cultural contexts. Depending on where they lived, when they lived, and to whom they were telling the stories, their Gospel stories have different and unique voices. So the question we need to ask is why this story was important for the Christian community of Matthew’s time.

The story of the Canaanite woman is in both Matthew and Mark. The Gospel of Matthew alone mentions that Jesus praises her great faith, whereas in Mark Jesus simply says, “For saying this, you may go your way”. It is noticeable that Matthew particularly emphasizes the great faith of Gentiles, contrasting it with the disciples’ inadequate faith. In another encounter with a Gentile, in Matthew 8:10, Jesus praises his faith saying, “Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith.” Notice how the Gospel of Matthew starts and finishes; it starts with the Genealogy of Jesus, the Messiah, which includes five women – Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba and Mary, and all except Mary have either Gentile origins or strong Gentile connections; Rahab in particular is a Canaanite woman just like the unnamed woman in today’s story; and Matthew ends the Gospel story saying “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.” In other words, Matthew tells us a story of salvation which was started with Abraham, and was fulfilled through Jesus, and continues to extend through mission. And the story has always been

and always will be for everyone regardless of their gender, race, class or any other background, because it is *God's* mission.

The Gospel of Matthew was written for a largely Jewish audience in a context of an increasing blend of Jew and Gentile in the early Christian community. So today's story was a reminder for Matthew's Jewish audience that God's mercy knows no boundaries; even Jesus, a Jew like the audience, was challenged by the Gentile woman, and learned from her, so we can do it, and we must do it. The Canaanite woman's faith was based on a simple but powerful idea: God's mercy is for everyone.

I'd like to introduce you to an example of the crumbs of our time.

In his book, *Building Social Business – The New Kind of Capitalism that Serves Humanity's Most Pressing Needs*, Muhammad Yunus, a Bangladeshi economist and a Nobel Peace Prize winner, shares how his simple but powerful idea – shoes for all - changed a big company.

Yunus was invited to meet with the CEO of Adidas, who wanted to understand the concept of social business. The question arose as to what Adidas could do to address a pressing social problem. Yunus said, "Maybe Adidas can start with a statement of commitment, something like this: Nobody in the world should go without shoes. As a shoe company, it is our responsibility to make shoes affordable even to the poorest person." The CEO of Adidas agreed that this statement made sense and wanted to meet with his senior colleagues to discuss this idea. Later that day, they met again and he asked Yunus how cheap the shoes would have to be in order for them to be affordable to even the poorest people. The response, "Maybe under one dollar or so, I guess." Yunus thought this was the end of their conversation but to his surprise, the CEO of Adidas, at the end of the meeting, declared that the Adidas Group would join Yunus' organization to launch a social business to produce shoes for the poor in Bangladesh for a price as close as possible to one euro. All Yunus had was audacity and a dream – and he convinced one of the largest sporting-goods companies to collaborate in his vision. What visions can we have, and what dreams, audacious or modest, can we share with our town this year?

We continue to practice the great faith of the Canaanite woman here in Ladysmith with simple but powerful ideas such as, "every child in our town should enter school with all of the supplies they need", "food is for everyone", "we can grow delicious, fresh produce to share on our own land", and "we are all God's children despite our differences, and we are all equally loved and blessed."