

Eleventh Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/A): “Dogged Determination, Scraps from the Table, Changes of Heart”

Isaiah 56:1, 6-8, Matthew 15: 21-28

August 15-16, 2020

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Most of the action at the dinner table happens totally above board, at plate level. But anyone with children and pets knows that there **may** be hidden action underneath the table, as well. We’re still not sure if my great-nephew dislikes breakfast sausage or simply enjoys dropping it, surreptitiously, piece by piece, to the dog who is patiently (and happily) waiting below. **The** most embarrassing dinnertime moment for Pastor Mark, Kristiane and me, though, came one Thanksgiving in the parsonage dining room. One of my nephews and his family were visiting, and the three of us were thanking our lucky stars that our dog, Bear, had behaved throughout the meal and hadn’t begged once. Then came time to clear the dinner dishes to get ready for dessert. My nephew’s wife began to stand up to help, when we noticed her pause and bend down to peek under the tablecloth. She was muttering, “I can’t imagine where my other shoe went...” I got a bad feeling when I realized Bear was under the table, busily chewing on something. Sure enough: Katie had kicked off her **designer** shoes while eating, and Bear had snagged one of them and was gnawing on it as if it were a drumstick. It was far gone by the time we discovered the theft. We were mortified, but thankfully she laughed, and we were convinced all over again what a good choice my nephew had made in marrying her!

Dogs under the table figure in today’s Gospel. Apparently in Jesus’ day, people used flat bread, like pita, in place of silverware. You’d scoop up food from a bowl with a piece of pita, eat the food, then use the pita as a napkin to clean your hands and mouth, after which you’d chuck it under the table where it quickly disappeared, because canine behavior hasn’t really changed all that much over the past 2,000 years. Easy clean-up!

That detail of life in the 1<sup>st</sup> century crops up in the middle of today’s healing story.

St. Matthew tells us that our Lord Jesus, unusually, has ventured into Gentile territory with His disciples.

This is the only time in Matthew's Gospel that Jesus goes so far afield. And in this story Jesus tells us why; it's because of His belief that:

*"I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."* (Matt. 15:24)

This is why He ignores the shouting of the woman who's trailing Him:

*"Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon."*  
(Matt. 15:22b)

Jesus feels there is no healing possible and He has no comfort to offer, so why engage her? (Not too different, maybe, than us avoiding eye contact with the panhandler we're not planning to give money to....)

So we've got at least two lessons to learn here:

- 1) **The woman's behavior** teaches us once again the power of **dogged** determination and loving perseverance.
- 2) **Jesus' behavior** teaches us that even **His** views evolved over time, and that **moving to greater inclusion** is a holy development in our own thinking and in the life of our community.

Starting with the woman: like God in last week's reading about Elijah, this woman is not taking no for an answer. The fact that she has **no** standing in the court of Jewish popular opinion doesn't dissuade her from pleading her case. She's a Canaanite, part of a people **despised** by the Jews; she is probably a worshiper of Baal, and so is viewed as a godless pagan; and she's a woman, another major strike against her. She's definitely raising a ruckus, to the point that the disciples are so irritated by her they beg their Master:

*"Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us."* (Matt. 15:23c)

Or, in the paraphrase from *The Message*:

*Jesus ignored her. The disciples came and complained, "Now, she's bothering us. Would you please take care of her? She's driving us crazy."* (Matt. 15:23, *The Message*)

In this interpretation they're actually begging Jesus to exorcise the woman's daughter just so she'll be satisfied and go away.

Jesus isn't going to do anything for the sheer sake of convenience, the disciples' or His own. He does what He does because He believes it's His Father's will. And up to this point, Jesus' understanding of His Father's will has been that He's **only** been sent to the Jews. The woman overhears Him explaining that to the disciples and she ups the ante by coming forward and kneeling at His feet. She's more succinct in her message now: "**Lord, help me.**" (Matt. 15:25b) (She may be a pagan, but she uses the same, universal 911 call that Peter used last week when he was sinking into the deep blue sea: "Lord, save me!")

Jesus can't pretend not to see someone kneeling right in front of Him, just about touching His sandals. So He states what He thinks is obvious:

*"It's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."* (Matt. 15:26)

'**Not** words we want to hear from our Lord's lips. There's just no way to gussy them up or "prettify" them. But to quote the words on a little pin I wear and treasure: "**Nevertheless she persisted.**"

*She was quick: "You're right, Master, but beggar dogs do get scraps from the master's table."*  
(Matt. 15:27, *The Message*)

Do you see it?? This valiant woman had chutzpah and humility in equal measure! Undergirding both the humility and the chutzpah were her deep love of her daughter and her total faith that if Jesus willed, He could make the child whole. (Tune in to one of our prayer sessions this coming Wed. to hear more about what we can learn from this candidate for "Mother of the Year.")

There's no getting around it: at this point the Holy Spirit changes Jesus' mind and softens His heart. Our Lord decides He can **indeed** do something for this persistent, insistent woman:

*Jesus gave in. "Oh, woman, your faith is something else. What you want is what you get!"*  
*Right then her daughter became well.* (Matt. 15:28, *The Message*)

The Holy Spirit still changes minds and softens hearts. Ours.

Especially those of you who are seniors have seen a boatload of change in the Church's attitudes and in Church teachings over the past 50 to 75 years. We've come to accept female pastors, divorced pastors, gay pastors. We study, serve and pray with our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters, not just with the Protestant ones. We have invited Muslim friends to offer adult forums here. We have Jewish

friends worship with us and co-lead Bible studies. Spanish-speaking friends are our hosts for Las Posadas every December in Fellowship Hall. Holocaust survivors have been gracious to share their stories with this Lutheran community. Like Saul's healing after his blinding on the road to Damascus, we can say, thanks be to God, **some** scales have fallen from our eyes.

We know that our spiritual vision is still nowhere near 20/20 – but Lord-willing we'll allow the Holy Spirit to do spiritual Lasik surgery to correct our spiritual near-sightedness, far-sightedness and astigmatism, giving us a less distorted, more up-close-and-personal, better focused, more accurate, more compassionate, God's-eye-view of our brothers and sisters and of the world. We'll be more open to the insights the Holy Spirit longs to give us if we can honestly acknowledge that **at least sometimes** we make value judgments of others if their skin color is different, their first language is other than English, they weren't born here, they're of a different denomination or religion, or their sexuality differs from ours.

Let's envision the doors of our church as openings to let people in rather than barriers to keep them out. We've all been welcomed by our Lord and by the existing community. How can **we** do any less for others? How **dare** we do any less for others?? Amen

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