

Rev. Carol Cook
Sermon: "Welcome to the Table"
First Christian Church Baltimore
August 14, 2011

Gospel: Matthew 15: 21-28, New Revised Standard Translation p.17

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. 22 Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." 23 But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." 24 He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." 25 But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." 26 He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." 27 She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." 28 Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

Let us Pray: Breathe on us, O God, that we may be filled
with your Spirit - and led by your living word - Jesus
Christ our Lord. Bless the words of my lips and the
meditations of our hearts. We ask it in his name. Amen.

Sermon: Welcome to the Table

My minister when I was growing up would sometimes give his sermon by becoming a person witnessing the event. We would get a first person insight into the story surrounding Jesus, and the impact of those stories stayed with me. I have created a few like that since I started preaching, and this week, while researching the scriptures, I found this first-person narrative by Rev. Richard Faircloth. I hope it offers you a new perspective on the gospel story.

Stories help us to use our imagination, they help us to hear what God is saying to us, and when we listen and wonder as did our ancestors by their fires and in their temples and synagogues, the Holy Spirit helps us to hear what it is God is saying.

There are a few questions that I would like for you to keep in mind while you listen to the story:

- what was the event like?
- what were the people in it thinking about?
- what happened and why did it happen that way?
- How is God found in the story?

Here is the story that Rev. Faircloth called Crumbs From the Table, but I call Welcome to the Table. Relax and listen.

She didn't belong there. I knew it and the rest of us knew it. We were just sitting down to dinner when she barged in. The dogs woke up immediately and from their place under the table they began to bark.

One of the children started to cry as the woman frantically looked around the room.

I was startled and I stood up immediately. I could feel myself beginning to get angry as I looked at this dishevelled and dirty woman. John and James, who had been sitting near the door had leapt up at the same time I had - and they were already reaching out to stop from the woman from coming closer to the table when she spotted the master. "Lord, Son of David" - she cried out as they moved in front of her, "Have mercy on me! My daughter is sick. She is suffering terribly from demon possession..."

The master must of heard her over the noise of the two dogs and the child, but he never said a word.

He didn't even look up from his plate.

By this time not only John and James, but I and three others had surrounded the woman and we began to hustle her out the door. She was interrupting not only our meal, but the time that Jesus had specially set aside for teaching us about the Kingdom he was going to establish. We had no intention of letting her get in the way of that.

The woman struggled a bit, but she didn't have a chance. Hauling nets gives a person a lot of strength, and she was outnumbered. We got her outside even more quickly than a bouncer gets a drunk out of a tavern.

But let me tell you, once outside, she caused just as much trouble as a drunk does. She was loud and insistent. She tried to get by us and to get back inside. She kept on saying to us that she had to see the miracle worker, that her daughter was in terrible shape, that she needed help.

She must of clutched at and grabbed each and every one of us as she pleaded.

I tell you, she was a real pain. I just wanted to get back inside for dinner.

James tried to reason with her.

"Look", he said, "You have no right to be here. You've got no right to bother the teacher. You are a foreigner, you don't believe in anything we believe in, your people are gentiles, they are heathens, and your behaviour shows that you are too. There is no way the master is going to help you, so please go away."

"I've got to see him", she said, "I know he can help me. He has done so much for others."

"That may be", James said, "but he's not going to do anything for you. You are not only a woman, you are a Canaanite,

You don't go to the synagogue,

You don't obey the law of Moses,

You are unclean,

You eat forbidden food.

To make matters worse... you have absolutely no respect.

Jesus is trying to eat.

He is a guest in another man's home,

and this is supposed to be a special time for us all,

And you just barge in and start demanding help!

Listen! Please! Go away! You are not going to get help here."

You know what she did?

That wretched woman just shook her head and said:

"I know he will help me, he's got to help me!"

John butted in, "Look", he said, "Go away. We've told you that you're not welcome here. We've told you that Jesus isn't going to have anything to do with your type. So why don't you just get lost."

I tell you she was a crazy woman. She didn't know her place, that's for sure. The more we said to her, the louder and more persistent she was. She cried, she begged, she screamed. There was no reasoning with her.

After a few minutes of this I got the idea of asking Jesus to tell her to go away. I figured that if he said something to her she'd get the picture and stop her infernal racket.

I mentioned the idea to a couple of the others and they agreed that it was the only thing to do if we were going to have any peace.

As soon as I opened the door to go in the dogs began barking again. Someone hissed at them to be quiet as I went over to Jesus. He was sitting with the child who had cried earlier and eating and talking with our host.

Our host looked a little embarrassed.

He was trying to pretend that nothing was going on -
but the woman was standing just outside the open door
where my two mates were waiting for the word
and the noise level was none too low.

"Excuse me", I said to the Master, "could you please tell that woman to go away. She is really pestering us with all her crying and carrying on."

Jesus looked at his host, then at me, and said -- "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." --

I tell you, Jesus was really frustrating at times.
He never seemed to give a straight answer to a simple question.
But even so, this time he was backing us up.

It was like he had heard everything we had said to the woman, so I turned to tell the wretched woman that the master had told her to go away.

Just as I was turning around, she squeezed by the guys at the door and ran over to right beside the master, and fell on down on her knees at his feet.

"Lord, help me", she said.

I didn't do a thing. I was tired. I figured after what he had said Jesus would handle it just fine.

And he did.

Jesus looked at her at his feet.

She bowed her head and looked down.

Then he looked around the room for a moment.

The child beside him was busy eating a piece of bread as if

nothing untoward had happened.

The dogs were nuzzling around under the table.

Our host was staring at him,

no doubt wondering what Jesus was going to do to get rid of this problem.

John and James and the others were all inside by this point.

They were still standing, waiting to see if they were going to be needed again.

It became very quiet in the room as the master looked around, the only sounds were those of the flies and of the child eating.

Then Jesus looked down at the woman and said to her

"It is not right to take the children's bread and to toss it to their dogs" --

A couple of the disciples smiled.

I must confess that I grinned too.

It was such a well turned phrase.

The kind that only Jesus seemed to be able to come up with.

It made the point well.

As far as I was concerned, it certainly disposed of her and all of her kind.

I caught James looking at me and began to nod my head at him. As I did so the woman looked up at Jesus and stared him in the eyes.

"Yes Lord", she said to him in this incredibly calm and clear voice, and I swear to you she had this little smile on her face,

"Yes Lord", she said, "but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

I was stunned. The woman really was too much.

Lippy, rude, obnoxious, unclean, disrespectful, I could go on!

Anyway - do you know what Jesus did?

He smiled at her, as if it was all some great contest of wits and he said to her

"Woman, you have great faith, For your reply, your request is granted. Go home, your daughter is healed."

I just could not understand it.

I mean why in the world did Jesus do that?
She did not belong there.
She was not one of us. She was nothing but a Canaanite
Jesus knew it, I knew it, and the rest of us knew it.
I just don't understand Jesus sometimes.
I just don't understand....

Now, I ask you to pause and think about welcoming. What are the things that make a person feel welcome? What are the things that make a person feel unwelcome? Imagine someone thinking about coming to a worship service, coming to this table, when they've never been here before, when they don't know about Jesus. What are the barriers that keep them out of the building? How can we reach them to help them feel welcome when we don't even know who they are?

Hymn of invitation, #493 "Somos Uno en Cristo"

Our hymn of invitation is a new one for us, but I sang it many times at General Assembly. We're going to work on singing the Spanish, at least for the beginning phrase: Somos Uno en Cristo. Please turn to p. 493 and repeat after me. Patti will play it through for us, and we will sing it three times, using the Spanish at least for the beginning every time. This song has a beat to it, so I invite to let your bodies move, to clap your hands to your sides (since you have to hold the hymnal!)

We are all welcome to the table – just as we work to learn the Spanish, the new tune, and the beat, and so we feel a little uncomfortable, a little hesitant, think about those who don't know anything about our worship service and how they might feel coming here. It helps if someone is there to "lead them in." If someone is already a friend and willing to sit with them, show them the way, explain things to them. Let us stand, dance, and sing hymn #493, "Somos Uno en Cristo"