

“Crumbs from the Table”
Text: Matthew 15:21-28
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Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith!” Matthew 15:28a

In last Monday’s *New York Times*, there appeared an article that apparently struck a chord with a number of my colleagues. I know this because by the end of the day the article was posted on the pages of twenty-five of my Facebook friends. All of these friends had one important characteristic in common with another and with me. Every one of us has graduated from seminary in recent years and every one of us is serving in some ministry context, most in congregations. The title of the article was, “Taking A Break from the Lord’s Work” and the first paragraph told the story, “The findings have surfaced with ominous regularity over the last few years, and with little notice: Members of the clergy now suffer from obesity, hypertension and depression at rates higher than most Americans. In the last decade, their use of antidepressants has risen, while their life expectancy has fallen. Many would change jobs if they could.”ⁱ

The reporter, Paul Vitello, goes on to describe the crisis of overwork among ministers, including the story of one pastor who had not taken a vacation in eighteen years.

Eighteen years.

Now, I do not mention this recent article in an attempt to garner sympathy or an extra week’s vacation. I do not even cite it in an attempt to threaten you with that well-worn seminary aphorism: “When the shepherd is not fed, the shepherd eats the sheep.” My sense is that the conclusions of these studies are consequential for all of us. The increasing stress and workaholism that members of the clergy experience have their roots in the same challenges that face us all. The drive toward greater and more efficient productivity. The constant availability of communication through cell phones, text messaging, and social media. The financial and moral pressures of high unemployment and struggling institutions. The endless competition posed by more creative, innovative, and energetic colleagues. The list could go on. The cure, or at least a temporary remedy, for this mounting pressure, according to the article, is relatively simple. Take a little time off. Do something that relaxes your mind and refreshes your soul. And, perhaps most importantly, acknowledge your humanity, your limits, and your dependence on others.

If this final recommendation seems most challenging to you, I would submit that you are in good company. In this morning’s gospel story we find Jesus himself struggling with the demands and requirements of his vocation. A bit of context may be enlightening. By this point of Matthew’s gospel, Jesus has gained a large and cumbersome following. In the previous chapter, he tries to take a break by taking a boat to a deserted place, but his plans are immediately compromised; as Matthew tells it, “When the crowds heard it

they followed him on foot from the towns, and when he went ashore he saw a great crowd” (Matthew 14:14). No Sabbath rest. No vacation. Instead, Jesus feeds five thousand hungry people that day. The very next day, Jesus goes up on a mountain to pray (maybe to his cabin at Montreat, Mary). There Matthew tells us he is blessedly all alone. For a moment. Just as he is catching his breath, a terrible storm comes up and his trusty disciples find themselves on a boat in the middle of the raging sea. So Jesus packs up his picnic basket and fishing pole and heads back down the mountain, walks across the water, and calms the storm. It is the epitome of a vacation cut short by crisis at the workplace.

All of this stands as background when we come to this morning’s story. Jesus is on the road and is pursued by a large crowd of needy people. It is at this moment that a Canaanite woman begins to shout in his direction. Have mercy on me, Lord! My daughter is tormented by a demon.

If you and I were to write the script, the next scene might go differently. Our picture of Jesus is informed by centuries of theological reflection and by Sunday school felt-board cutouts of a smiling savior robed in white. We are influenced by the well-known refrain of “Jesus loves me, this I know” and by stories of Jesus welcoming children with warmth and love. All of that is true.

And yet, despite the high gloss divine shine with which Jesus is often painted, he was also human. His energy was finite. He required rest. And so the Canaanite woman, a foreigner and enemy of the Jews with no social standing or power, is the recipient of some of the harshest words Jesus ever uttered. In response to her direct request for help, Jesus brushes the woman aside with a bitter metaphor that is both dismissive and offensive—it is not fair to give the children’s food to a dog. Maybe he was exhausted by the desert heat or the pressing crowds, maybe he was intent on getting wherever he was going without delay, maybe he was influenced by pushy disciples, perhaps overwhelmed or under-impressed, Jesus closes the door to the Canaanite woman. You are not my concern. This is not my job. Talk about clergy burnout; talk about the shepherd eating the sheep.

We have all been in the sandals of this Canaanite woman. We have all felt the deep pain of desperation and the even deeper pain of God’s silence. We have all borrowed the Psalmist’s powerful words: “How long, O Lord, will you look on (and do nothing)?” How long must orphans in Haiti, fisherman on the Gulf Coast, migrants in the desert and innocent victims of violence suffer? How long will disease capture our loved ones? How long will economic uncertainty cloud our vision? How long will relationships be fractured and old wounds continue to cause pain? How long will we feel the gnawing sense of isolation, fear, distrust, and division from those we love? How long will you be silent? The Canaanite woman’s urgent request is turned back. She might have given up. She might have sent her daughter away. She might have lost all faith and, red with embarrassment, walked the long road back to her home in defeat.

But this desperate and faithful woman is not finished yet. She has one more opportunity to speak and she does not waste it. Having been called a dog, the woman accepts the label but not the conclusion. “Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ tables.” It is as if the key turns in the lock. Jesus acknowledges the woman for the first time. I picture him wide-eyed: “Great is your faith. Let it be done for you as you wish.” And so it is.

What changed? What was the power at work in those few words? Perhaps it was the courage within them. Perhaps it was the faith behind them. The Canaanite woman, in acknowledging her dependence on Jesus, held a mirror before him, giving him a glimpse of his own vocation. His busy schedule and hectic life had crowded out those things that really mattered. In the rush to move on to the next town and outrun the throngs of people nipping at his heels, Jesus had forgotten the heart of his mission. And a Canaanite woman, with no power or influence at all, called him back to his true self. If you don’t have time to share a meal, the woman says, at least give me the crumbs from your table.

Crumbs from the table. Whether she knew it or not, the Canaanite woman chooses the most persuasive image for her audience. The table stands at the center of Jesus’ ministry. It was at table with sinners and tax collectors and the poor and outcast that Jesus broke down barriers of hostility and division while breaking bread. His parables speak of the heavenly banquet that will take place in the kingdom of God. And, later in Matthew, at the Passover table, Jesus will share a meal with his disciples; a meal that comes to be the central repeated sacrament of his followers. Each time we celebrate this sacrament, we are reminded of Luke’s account on the road to Emmaus, when, in the breaking of bread, the eyes of the disciples are opened and they recognize who he is. Will Willimon writes, “when we want to meet God, we Christians do not need to go up some high mountain, or rummage around in our psyches, we do not need to hold hands, close our eyes and sing ‘Kum Ba Yah’ in hope of revelation. We gather and break bread in Jesus’ name. That’s where he has chosen to meet us, that’s where our eyes are opened and we recognize him.”ⁱⁱ This is where God has chosen to meet us—not in a heavenly kingdom in the sweet by and by but in the very places where we live and work and play and eat.

Here God meets us. The crumbs from this table have the power to feed the multitudes. The crumbs from this table can provide hospitality and nourishment for all of God’s children. The crumbs from this table can feed your starving soul with enough left over to share the nutrition with all those whom you meet. The crumbs from this table can heal the pain of isolation and rebuild fractured relationships.

But we *have* to come to the table. We have to pause long enough to acknowledge our dependence on God and on one another. We have to lay aside the myth of independence and the deceptive lie that we are divine. God’s kingdom comes near not when we drag it toward us but when we see the world around us with new perspective.

One of the interesting phenomena of our time is the length to which churches go to bring in new visitors and potential members. I remember a church in the town I was raised that had a snow cone booth at the little league baseball games. The snow cones were free, with one condition. You had to sign up for Bible School. Churches bend over backward and reinvent themselves on a monthly basis to be attractive to seekers. Perhaps this is the way of the world in 2010 and I should just get used to it. But I have this stubborn conviction that the church does not exist primarily to meet the desires of prospective Christians, but rather to define, and redefine, our deepest needs. How about this for a church publicity campaign: "You need to be here." Or, as the prophet Isaiah wrote, "Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread? Come to the feast" (Isaiah 55:1-5). Perhaps you've heard this image: evangelism is one hungry person telling another hungry person where to find bread.

We need to be fed here, for a few moments away from the frenzy of our daily lives. We need this hour. And the good news is this: the crumbs from this table will become a banquet of welcome for all God's children and no one will be turned away, held back, or left out. No one. Thanks be to God. Come to the table.

ⁱ Paul Vitello, "Taking a Break From the Lord's Work," *New York Times*: August 2, 2010.

ⁱⁱ William H. Willimon, *Lord Teach Us: The Lord's Prayer and the Christian Life*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996. p. 61.