

Under the Table

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship with Communion
at Weekapaug Chapel, Westerly

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Text: Mark 7:24-30

Crumbs under the table. Now there is a reality all of us can recognize and claim as our own. I don't know about you but in my house there always seem to be crumbs under the table. Especially the kitchen table, the primary gathering spot for everyone who enters my home. Family, friends, even the occasional repair person always seem to end up at the kitchen table sooner or later. Perhaps that's why the perennial crumb situation is so resistant to all efforts to contain it. Somebody is always there doing something. But not all those things involve food and yet the crumbs persist. Why is that, I wonder. Perhaps my efforts to sweep the kitchen floor are not what they should be. Perhaps the kibble crumbs from the dog's meals multiply in the dark. That's long been a theory of mine just like my long held belief that clothes dryers consume socks and wire coat hangers multiply exponentially in the dark recesses of the hall closet.

Whatever the reason, crumbs under the table seem to be an inescapable reality for me, and perhaps they are for you too. Even if they aren't, you have to admit that it is really quite remarkable that Jesus can find a way to use even so mundane a detail as

crumbs under the table to get us thinking about life and faith more deeply than we might otherwise. Jesus does this a lot, using minutia of daily life to provoke us to deeper pondering. He talks about seeds and weeds, about figs and fig trees. He even talks about manure once! Seriously. The noteworthy thing about the story in today's text from Mark, though, is that Jesus' "under the table" words do not sound like the Jesus we know and love at all. In fact, when Jesus is talking about crumbs under the table in this text, it is intended as a pointed criticism, a sharp rebuke to the woman who provoked it. And yet this woman prevailed. In fact, she changed Jesus' mind, one of the few if not the only person to do this in all of the gospels.

Biblical scholars of all types – conservative, evangelical, progressive, liberationist and even post-denominational have differing ideas as to why this text is as it is. The scholars writing in *The Interpreters' Bible* published in 1951 believe Jesus' words seen in this story as so out of character with Jesus that they posit the possibility that this story is a later insertion intended to expand its appeal to Gentile audiences as the message of the gospels spread across the known world. In other words, Jesus didn't say this but someone else at a later date thought it would be a good story to broaden the movement's appeal so they made it up. Hmmm. Seems like a real stretch to me.

By the 1960's this thinking has been largely set aside as evidenced by the argument advanced in the popular *Barclay's Commentary* series. William Barclay posits that this story is actually just a continuation of the message of the story immediately preceding it in which Jesus is lecturing religious leaders from Jerusalem on what is truly clean and unclean. He tells them that it is not what goes into the body that is unclean but rather what comes out of it that is unclean, referring to unkind words and actions to those considered inferior to the religious elite of the Israelite community of Jesus' day. In other words, Jesus didn't really mean to be harsh. He was just re-emphasizing an earlier point. This argument doesn't make sense given that the other story references a completely different situation in a different town with different people who would not have been around to witness the encounter between Jesus and the woman. The simple truth is that Jesus' words to the woman were a very harsh rebuke containing potentially nasty overtones, depending on how one looks at them. To call anyone a dog in Jesus' society was a real insult. To infer a woman was a dog was tantamount to calling a woman the "B" word with exactly the same connotation that word would have today.

So what's up with that, we have to ask. Who is this Jesus with such a sharp tongue? Who is this Jesus whom we consider to be the epitome of loving kindness yet who seems indifferent to the

pleadings of a woman of a different nationality and religion? Perhaps, dear friends, this is the Jesus who still had some things to learn, the Jesus who didn't quite have all the answers people, including us, assume he had by this point in his life. Quite a thought to ponder, isn't it? And yet there is much in this story that shows this is exactly what the story is telling us. This story is reminding us that in spite of an extraordinary relationship with God and incredible, life changing insights into God as a result of this relationship, Jesus was still human, as much a product of his context and environment as any of us. True, he had already moved beyond much of what his context – the strict purity codes and expectations of Temple Judaism located within an impoverished Palestine struggling under harsh Roman rule – had taught him were to form the boundaries of an adult Jewish male's life. In the preceding story in this same chapter of Mark, he has just finished lecturing religious officials from Jerusalem that their understanding of the importance of the holiness codes, the purity codes, were all wrong. Added to this, he had already shown his willingness to heal Gentiles who came to him for help. His healing of the demoniac at the Decapolis proved this. So, it was not for religious differences that he rebuked the woman. Similarly, he himself had chosen to go into a known Gentile region and he was already reaching out to others of differing nationalities with his message of a whole new way to be in relationship with

God. So, presumably differing nationalities were not a problem for him either or why would he be where he was. He had also granted requests from people who were asking for healing on behalf of someone else who was not present, like Jairus' daughter.

So, what made the woman worthy of such a harsh, nasty rebuke from an otherwise loving, kind man? Well, the only difference between the Syro-Phoenician woman and all these other people was that she was a woman. She was a woman who broke all the rules of societal norms in both Jewish and Gentile culture by daring to come into his presence as a man unknown to her in a private residence where he had gone to find some peace. She still adopted the proper posture of a female approaching a male – she bowed down at his feet as she relayed her request but she had already broken the biggest taboo by approaching him in the first place. This is like the reason Jesus so harshly denied her request when he says, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food, and throw it to the *dogs*.” She was asking for her own child so “children” was being used by Jesus as a metaphor to refer to the children of God known as Israel, a fact not lost on this bright, quick-witted woman. She immediately responded to him, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” In the blink of an eye she turned his own argument and even his insult around, using it to get to him to see that helping her would not change his ability to help the others he

felt bound to. A gutsy move on her part. No doubt she was holding her breath and shaking as she awaited a response.

And ... Jesus relents. And it is important for us to note the reason why he relents and heals the woman's daughter. It is not just that he is still the kind and loving Jesus we know who reacts from pity. Not at all. He himself gives his reason for helping: "For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter." He helps her because she used *his* words to enable him to see beyond his own limited perspective. It was her use of his own words that expanded his perspective to include her and her daughter, and by extension, all the peoples he would encounter in the world beyond the narrow borders of Galilee. She showed him the way to further enlarge his understanding of the boundaries of the realm of God. This woman literally argued with Jesus and won. She actually changed his mind and taught him something he didn't know before his encounter with her. Imagine that.

The parallels of this story to so much of what is happening in our lives and all around us are powerful and compelling. This story is for us an invitation from Jesus and a nameless woman from two millennia ago to make the effort needed to bend over and look under our own metaphorical tables to see what we think we know but don't. It is a challenge to consider deeply and prayerfully who is asking for the crumbs under our tables of abundance and privilege and how we will answer. It is a call from

God's own self to reflect on all the ways in which we say "no" without thinking when God's beloved people are in desperate need of an unconditional "yes". Yes, immigrants, adults and children, are people, just people, like us, in need of the benefit of the doubt – our doubt – more than anything else. Yes, the poor and the homeless need assistance that will cost money, given with judiciousness and care to be sure, but remembering Jesus' instructions to give without counting the cost or judging the merit of the one needing help. Yes, everyone – *everyone* – has a right to be healthy and to receive what they need to make sure that is the case. If this were not what Jesus believed, why are healing and helping the least of these so central to his life and work while he was physically here on this earth? How can we do otherwise?

Something to ponder as we gather this morning for the sacrament of Communion, celebrating our welcome to the table hosted for us by Jesus Christ himself. You may not know this but during the Middle Ages, there was a major issue in the Catholic Church about what happened if crumbs from the sacred host – the Communion bread – accidentally fell to the floor as Communion was being offered to the people. Were the rats and mice and bugs crawling around then consuming the body of Christ? And if they were what did that mean? It sounds funny to us a thousand years later but in that moment of time in the 9th century it was a huge big deal leading to centuries of practice of

holding a plate under each person's mouth as the bread was placed upon their tongues by the priest lest any wayward, teeny crumbs find their way to the floor. To this day, if you watch what the priest does to end the Communion liturgy, he picks up the bread which held the host, tilts it toward the chalice and wipes any crumbs into the wine in the chalice which he then consumes entirely. The lack of wayward crumbs is thus assured.

But perhaps we need a few wayward crumbs in our lives and in our churches. In fact, I would argue we already have them in both places but we just don't know they're there. And, because we don't even know they are there, we can't discern what they might mean in the broader scope of life and work. What might happen if we made a more intentional effort to be on the lookout for all those wayward crumbs of life – people and situations needing our attention and our help. Perhaps if we can learn, like Jesus learned from the Syro-Phoenician woman, that even the crumbs have value to God making them worthy of God's assistance, we will realize anew that they are worthy of ours as well. Perhaps if we dare to look under the table at all those things we try to ignore and not see, all those things and people we pretend don't matter, we will discover just how very special they really are. Maybe, just maybe, God put them there for us to find because each and every one of them leads us back to God, if only we will imagine they can. Now wouldn't that be something? Amen.

The “Real” Jesus

A Children’s Message for worship at Weekapaug Chapel
Sunday, August 5, 2018

Props: Jesus doll, Action figure Jesus, Jesus images

Question? *Who can tell me which of these is the real Jesus?*

- Receive answers and respond as appropriate
- Lesson – The real Jesus can only be the Jesus who lives in our hearts.
- “Jesus Loves Me”

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BENEDICTION

As you head out into your week and whatever it holds,
May the Light of God surround you, the Love of God
enfold you, the power of God protect you and the Presence
of God watch over you. May you know in every part of
your being that wherever you are, God is already there
with you. May the peace of Christ, the fellowship of the
Holy Spirit and the abiding love of Almighty God be your
reality each day. Amen.