

“MUCH MORE THAN CRUMBS”

Mark 7:24-30

Women’s Network Retreat

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Jesus has been very busy. When we come across him in this morning’s Gospel, he’s been on a streak of activity: healing, preaching, telling stories. He tried to withdraw for a while but the people followed him, so he did some more healing, whipped up an impromptu picnic lunch for several thousand people, went off to pray, got called back out to quell a storm because some of his disciples were frightened, and then more people spotted him, and some officials came down from Jerusalem to question him, so that we can all understand that when he reaches that house in the district of Tyre he does not want to be disturbed. Again. Ever. Jesus, if anyone, deserved a break that day.

Yet, someone dares to disturb him. Someone who, to Jesus, “should be” an outcast on two grounds. First, she is Greek—a Gentile—a non-Jew. And in Mark’s Gospel, up until this point, Jesus has ministered only to Jews. Indeed he seems to see his mission to be solely to the lost sheep of Israel. Secondly, the person who dares disturb Jesus is a woman.

At that time, in that place, women, outside their homes, were essentially non-persons—by law and by custom. When a head count was being done, only adult male heads were counted. A woman could not go out of her house unveiled; women and girls could not attend school or go all the way into the temple. Men did not talk to women on the street, and it was considered particularly undignified for a scholar or teacher to speak with a woman in public. Some male merchants would not let women count change into their hands in the market place for fear of an accidental touch that might transfer the woman’s “uncleanness” to the man.

So, the weight of tradition could easily have swung down like a heavy dusty curtain and cut this strange woman off from Jesus’ attention. But Jesus did not let this happen.

Nor did the woman allow tradition to hold her back. Her daughter had a demon within her—that could mean, we guess, that the daughter was mentally ill or perhaps had epilepsy, both conditions that were attributed to demons. But whatever the diagnosis, this woman sees her daughter tormented and comes after help. She barges in on Jesus and, having done that audacious thing, falls at his feet and begs for help.

In response to her plea Jesus makes a barbed comment: “Let the children first be fed, for it is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” The children Jesus refers to are the Jews, the people of Israel, those to whom Jesus has been ministering. The dogs are the Gentiles, the non-Jews, like the woman, like me, and probably like you, and like most people who today are followers of Christ.

Even as Jesus questions her right—as a non-Jew—to request his help, we must pay attention to what he is NOT saying. Jesus does not say anything predictable or dismissive like, “Go home, woman, give me some rest.” Or, “How dare you come in here—if you need help, send your husband to talk to me.” No. Instead he makes a provocative comment in a popular debate style of the day. “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.”

And the woman, undaunted, not flustered, picks up the challenge and responds, “Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under table eat the children’s crumbs.” [It’s the kind of brilliant reply that I would only come up sometime the following day.....]

To which Jesus replies, “*For this saying* you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter.” Again, it is good to listen for what Jesus is NOT saying. Jesus does not say, “Your daughter is healed because of your humility.” or “Your daughter is healed because of your great love for her” or even “Your daughter is healed because of your faith”—although, of course, those elements twined through the crown of blessing he held out to her. Rather, Jesus says, “Your daughter is healed because of what you just said to me. Because of the wisdom you have imparted to me.” [Oh, yeah, that’s Jesus speaking, sometimes known as the Font of Wisdom.]

Well, the woman leaves. We never catch her name. [This seems familiar.] She goes her way and Jesus goes his, and, oh yes, since we have this record of what Jesus did next we get to see that after this meeting, this interaction, this mutual blessing, Jesus begins to extend his ministry beyond the people of Israel. Having heard this woman—let’s call her Ellen—Jesus changes and expands his mission. Having listened to this foreigner, this outsider, Jesus has, what, a change of heart? a change of vision? a clearer understanding of the great plan of salvation?

Both Ellen and Jesus saw the face of grace that day. Both Ellen and Jesus wore the face of grace that day.

Grace—suppleness, ease, unmerited gift, abundance, sheer and unstoppable excess of delight, totally undeserved, outlandish. We use the phrases: Saving grace. Grace note. Amazing grace.

Love is grace. A good night’s sleep is grace. Fresh strawberries are grace. Fresh insight is grace. Seeing a particular episode of JAG may be grace. Grace stalks us, sometimes hounds us. Grace marks the tangy transcendence of power into justice and justice into love when a community of faith bumbles and yearns its way into a future where failure is redeemed, hope is restored, and new possibilities streak through the heavens well out of reach of the mud of discouragement. Grace visits us, infuses us, and dispels our gawky awkwardness, when we move with faith and trust, gliding with the music of the spheres, dancing without looking at our feet.

In her novel, *Beloved*, Toni Morrison cites torrential downpours of grace. One of the faces of grace is Baby Suggs who, after slave life “had nothing left to make a living with

but her heart—which she put to work at once. “Accepting no title of honor before her name, but allowing a small caress after it,” [a grace note?] she became an unchurched preacher.... “When warm weather came Baby Suggs, holy, followed by every black man, woman and child who could make through, took her great heart to the Clearing....After situating herself on a huge flat-sided rock, Baby Suggs bowed her head and prayed silently.....Then she shouted, ‘Let the children come!’ and they ran from the trees toward her.

“‘Let your mothers hear you laugh,’ she told them, and the woods rang. The adults looked on and could not help smiling.

“Then ‘Let the grown men come,’ she shouted. They stepped out one by one from among the ringing trees.

“‘Let your wives and your children see you dance,’ she told them, and groundlife shuddered under their feet.

“Finally she called the women to her. ‘Cry,’ she told them. “For the living and the dead. Just cry.’ And without covering their eyes the women let loose.

“It started that way: laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then it got mixed up. Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children cried until, exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the Clearing damp and gasping for breath. In the silence that followed, Baby Suggs, holy, offered up to them her great big heart.

“She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glorybound pure.

“She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it.

“‘Here, she said, ‘in this here place, we flesh.....’” [*Beloved*, Toni Morrison, © 1987, pp. 87-88, Plume/Penguin paperback edition]

We keep returning, it seems, to the recognition that we live in flesh, robed in the universal garment of humanity. We flesh. And it is in the flesh that we receive grace, it is through our flesh that we convey grace.

We flesh here. Our daughters are afflicted and in pain. We will rise to the occasion and parry the jab that we do not deserve deliverance, the *insinuation* [emphasis on “sin” there] that we do not qualify—we are not pre-approved—for the credit line that extends to those deserving of life and nurture; we ward off that barb with the foil of wisdom: don’t tell me I’m not entitled to the food because I don’t have a seat at the table; there’s plenty of food, enough to feed even the dogs *under* the table.

Whoa! says Jesus, you have just danced us both into graceland. You have opened my eyes to what God has in mind for us all. And it's much more than crumbs. It's the whole loaf of life. Sustenance for today, and hope for tomorrow. Not just for the few and the privileged, but for the entire motley variegated animated human race.

It is not surprising that God should have chosen a woman and a "foreigner" to spark this revelation to Jesus. It is utter grace for us to witness Ellen's boldness and courage.

How easy it would have been for her to simply ride the current of current norms and mores, and not approach Jesus at all, to stifle the torment of her daughter's affliction, to overlook the wildest of possibilities to bring healing to the flesh and spirit of the flesh and blood which had been entrusted to her care. It would have been easy, but not graceful; easy, on the surface, but profoundly dis-eased and disturbing. Instead, Ellen became one of those people who not only raise hell but lower heaven. [William Sloane Coffin's words] Who bring the promise of hope and new life close to those crying out in anguish, in sorrow, in silent helplessness, in tarnished dreams.

"Asking, [in the words of Emmylou Harris] 'If there's no heaven, what is this hunger for?'

Our path is worn, our feet are poorly shod

We lift our prayer against the odds." [Emmylou Harris, "The Pearl"]

I give thanks for our sister Ellen, from Mark's Gospel. In a world where women still, too often, and to the detriment of all who are garbed in flesh, hesitate to take the steps that need to be taken for our own safety or liberation—or for that of those in our care—because it is so frightening to step outside the bounds of ingrained even church-taught niceness and compliance, because stepping beyond those bonds often in itself threatens our survival; in a world where it is so often near impossible for women to get close to the sources of transforming and restorative power; where the infuriatingly casual or violently intentional brutality of abuse, hardship, and rejection can petrify our imaginations and turn us to stone, in this time and this place, Ellen comes to us, "Asking, 'If there's no heaven [no graced land beyond what we live with daily] what is this hunger for? Our path is worn, our feet are poorly shod. [Yet] We lift our prayer against the odds.'"

Thirty-three years ago, when Bernice Sandler was Director of the Project on the Status and Education of Women, Association of American Colleges and Universities, she said, "I will know that we women have achieved full humanity when each of us believes that our lives are worthy of poetry."

Of poetry. Much more than crumbs.