

Crumbs

Proper 15A, August 20, 2023

Genesis 45:1-15; Psalm 133; Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32;

Matthew 15:(10-20), 21-28

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Priest in Charge

In the name of God- Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, Amen.

I will tell you right up front that I am going make a connection in this sermon that might seem on the surface like a strange one- a connection between the language of two different reflections written by one of my favorite authors: one on the story of the Canaanite woman and Jesus, and one written for Ash Wednesday.

But first, it is probably not a coincidence that we hear about the Canaanite woman's 'great' faith hard on the heels of Peter's 'little' faith in our Gospel story from last Sunday. This is one of the great gifts of using track 1- which we call 'continuous'- of the lectionary during this

season of Ordinary Time- it does not include every single verse, but enough that the stories and what they teach us build naturally on the ones that came before. The assumption here, of course, is that everybody wants more faith- that ‘more’ is better than ‘less’, and ‘great’ is better than ‘little.’ Faith is a word- like grace, or goodness, or mercy- that we frequently use without stopping to think what we really mean- as if every biblical text says the same thing about it or there is a universal definition for it that we all agree on and understand.

Faith, however, is as individual as we are and deeply interwoven with everything about us and our experiences in the world. Take Jesus’ affirmation of the woman’s faith in this story- this complex story with all its layers of history and culture and intention- and we end up with more questions about faith than answers. Why is her faith great? Is it because she is persistent? Is it because she names her need so clearly, so unswervingly? Is it because

she stays in the conversation despite the brush-offs she receives from both the disciples and Jesus, despite the boundaries that exist because she is an outsider in religion and geography, historically not considered worthy of the healing Jesus offers? Is it all these things combined- did she somehow follow all the prompts, check all the boxes- and so she becomes the poster child of Jesus' healing ministry no longer offered only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, but to all who declare their faith in Jesus as the Son of David, the long-promised Messiah- the first link in a chain between Jesus' mission to the Jewish people and the Good News offered to the world in the Great Commission: "Go therefore and make disciples of ALL nations?"

Last week, we wondered together about the risk we take when we think of faith as an act of will on our part, a way of being that we can attain if we just try a little harder. We talked about how so often Peter seems to

represent any of us who have ever had a moment of doubt, the example we hold up when we connect what happens in our lives with how much faith we ourselves possess- as if faith is something we can somehow measure. It would be so easy to read both these stories- Peter's and the Canaanite woman's- as if they are present in the Gospel narrative only as examples, larger than life generalizations- as if their human lives and experiences exist only on the symbolic level to teach us about how we should live, how we might increase our own faith. And as we talked about last week as well, this kind of conversation tends to focus us only on our weaknesses and growing edges, instead of on who God is- on all the miraculous things God has always and will always long to do for God's people.

I believe it is so important that we hear this story as grace, as mercy, as healing offered in response to the plea of *this particular person* for someone she loves more

than her own life: the woman's daughter is healed by Jesus instantly, not forced to bear the burden of demonic possession even one more moment. Her healing- and her mother's determination to seek it from Jesus- is not just a story told to make a point-it is as unique and as beloved as she is- as we all are. *Even if there were not a larger narrative of what true faith looks like and who may receive divine healing, her story would be enough- each of our stories would be enough*. I believe we learn from this particular story that God's mercy and healing and wholeness as made known in the compassion of Jesus knows no limits, no boundaries- that it is something God longs for us all to know. I am paraphrasing, but I love imagining that this is what Jesus said to Peter as he reached out his hand to Peter sinking in the sea: "Why did you give in to your doubt, when I have already given you everything you need to believe?"

During the months I've been with you, I've used several reflections by United Methodist minister and spiritual author Jan Richardson in sermons and other formation, because I treasure her way of going deeper into the story and seeking where God is present to us in all our longing to be known by God. In one of her reflections that I often use on Ash Wednesday, she writes in the words of our liturgy on that day that "we are dust and to dust we shall return", that dust is of little substance and we walk on it and sweep it away- and yet it is the very stuff of which God formed us, loving us all the while. **"Do you not know," she says, "what the Holy One can do with dust? Let us not be marked for sorrow, or for shame, or for thinking that we are less than we are, but for claiming what God can do within the dust, the stuff of which all the world is made."**

And in Jan's reflection written on today's Gospel story *I hear the very same language, but about crumbs-*

the metaphorical crumbs which the Canaanite woman begs Jesus to give her. Jan is writing as if she were this desperate and fiercely believing mother: **“I have seen you feed the thousands, seen miracles spill from your hands like water, like wine, seen you with circles and circles of crowds pressed around you and not one soul turned away. I am saying I know what you can do with crumbs and I am claiming mine, every morsel and scrap you have up your sleeve. Unclench your hand, your heart. Let the scraps fall like manna, like mercy for the life of my child, the life of the world.”**

Beloveds,

Do you not know what the Holy One can do with dust?

Do you not know what the Holy One can do with crumbs?

What if faith lies in believing that this is true- the truest thing we know?

Not just in our Gospel but in all of today's readings, I believe we are hearing that God sees us- has always seen us- has always wanted us to experience healing and reconciliation and life in all its fullness. I believe that faith is claiming that God knows us and we know God and that we are called to live in such a way that our lives point us always towards God. That our pleas are worthy of being shouted to God because we believe that God will grant us not only what we ask but so much more- that ***what we will be given will meet our needs.*** That the whole banquet is found in the crumbs, even as the kingdom of Heaven is contained in that tiniest of seeds, the mustard seed; that within what might seem small and insignificant and unworthy is the fullness of all God is to us ***because we believe it is so.*** That our faith is at its greatest when we feel at our smallest, sinking in stormy waters, living through challenging seasons, desperately crying out for healing for ourselves or someone we love- ***knowing who it is that we can cry out to and say: "Save***

me, Lord, rescue me, have mercy on me- I believe you can do this and that you will never reject, never forget your people. I know that what you give me will be enough- my faith trusts that you are and will always be all that I need. *Amen.*