

Sermon for August 20, 2017 – “Table Scraps”

20th Sunday in OT, Year A – Texts: Isaiah 56:1, 6-8; Matthew 15:21-28

Westwood First Presbyterian Church – Rev. Jeff Colarossi

She didn't belong there. I knew it. We all knew it. Even **she** 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 getting angry as I look at this dirty, disheveled Gentile woman. John and James, who'd been sitting near the door, had leapt up at the same time I did. As they reached out to stop the woman from coming closer to the Master she spotted Him. “Lord, Son of David!” she cried out, “Have mercy on me! My daughter is sick. She is suffering terribly from demon possession...” The Master must've heard her over the noise of the 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 me and three others surrounded the woman and began to hustle her out the door. She was interrupting our meal. She was also interrupting the time that Jesus had set aside to teach us about the kingdom of God. The kingdom He was going to establish. There was no way she was getting in the way of that! The woman struggled a bit but she didn't have a chance. Hauling fishing nets for a living can make you pretty strong, and she was outnumbered. We got her outside quickly but let me tell you, once outside she caused just as much trouble. She was loud. And she was insistent. She kept on saying to us that she had to see the miracle worker, that her daughter was in terrible shape and needed help. I tell you, she was a real pain. 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're a foreigner, you don't believe in anything we do. Your people are gentiles, heathens, and the way you're acting proves it. There's no way the Master's going to help you, so please go away!” “I must see him,” she said, “I know He can help me. He's done so much for others.” “That may be,” James said, “but He's not going to do anything for you. You're not only a woman – you're a Canaanite. You don't go to the synagogue, you don't obey the Law of Moses, you're unclean. You eat forbidden food. And, to make matters worse, you have absolutely no respect. Jesus is trying to eat. He's a guest in another man's home. 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're not going to get help here.” And you know what she did? That wretched woman just shook her head and she said: “I know He'll 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 wants absolutely nothing to do with **your** kind. 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.

At one point, I thought of asking Jesus to tell her to go away. I figured that if **He** said something to her maybe 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 the others were waiting for the word...and she was still carrying on. "Excuse me, Master," I said to the Jesus, "could you please tell that woman to go away? She's 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'd heard everything we'd said to the woman. So, I turned to tell this pain-in-the-you-know-what woman that the Master had told her to go away. Just as I'd turned around, she managed to squeeze her way in. She ran over to the master, and knelt at His feet. "Lord, help me," she said. The rest of us did nothing, we were tired. We figured after what Jesus said that He'd handle it just fine, and He did. Jesus looked at that woman there at His feet. The woman bowed her head and looked down. Then Jesus looked around the room for a moment. The child beside Him was busy eating a piece of bread as if nothing had happened. The dogs were nuzzling around under the table trying to find some scrap of food that might've fallen. Our host was staring at Jesus, no doubt wondering how He was going to get rid of this woman. John and James and the others were all inside by this point. It became very quiet in the room as the Master looked around. The only sounds were flies buzzing around and the child eating.

Then Jesus looked down at the woman. He said to her "It's 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 though I tried not to show it. It was such a well-turned phrase. The kind only Jesus seemed to be able to come up with you know? It made His point quite well. As far as I was concerned it'd certainly get rid of her and **her** kind. I caught James looking at me and began to nod my head at him. As I did the woman lifted her head. She looked right into Jesus' eyes. A slight smile came to her face and in an incredibly calm and clear voice she said to Him, "Yes Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." I was stunned! We were **all** stunned! What a piece of work! This 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 battle of wits. He said: "Woman, you have great faith. For your reply, your request is granted. Go home, you daughter is healed." "Your daughter is healed!" What?!?!? I just could not understand it. I mean, why in the world would Jesus do that? She didn't belong there. She wasn't one of us. She was a Canaanite, for pity's sake! Jesus knew it. I knew it. We **all** knew it. I gotta tell you, I just don't understand Jesus sometimes. I really don't. I mean, He welcomes everyone! And I mean everyone! But, you know, the more I think about it. The more I think I get it. The more I get what Jesus was up to that day with this woman, He was trying, as always, to teach us something. In fact, the more I think about it the more certain of it I am, certain that Jesus' words to the woman were as much to **us** as they were to **her**. And the long and the short of it is this, that in God's kingdom, the kingdom that we had gathered in that house to hear Jesus tell us about, all are welcome. Why? Because God says they are!

God promises that no one will be left out, gathering the faithful and the foreigners, bringing together the insiders and the outcast. All together as one people. Shame on us for trying to keep this woman from Jesus. I mean, who are we to say who gets to see him and who doesn't? Who gets to say who's in and who's out? Seriously, look at us disciples. We're not exactly the pick of the litter, definitely **not** movers and shakers of society. Matthew used to be a tax collector. Simon was a zealot. Some of us were fisherman. Heaven knows what the others did.

And I often wonder about Judas, but of all the people Jesus could've called as disciples, He chose **us**. So, who are we to judge who's worthy to be in the Master's presence? Think about it. And while you're at it, think about these two things...The first is, obviously, that all must be made welcome. ALL. That means you, me, everyone!!!

The second, perhaps less obvious thing, is that we're not the hosts in God's house. We're invited guests ourselves. We aren't called to welcome, as much as we're to act like we've been welcomed ourselves into God's family. We don't so much forgive the sins of others as we testify that our own sins have been forgiven. Martin Luther said: "We are all beggars hungry for the bread of God, telling the other beggars where the bread may be found." You might say that we're all dogs eat the crumbs that fall from our Master's table. And the Master Himself would make it all quite simple when He hosted our last meal together.

"This is my commandment: that you love one another as I've loved you." It seems to me that too many Christians believe that we're called to simply believe in Jesus; His teachings, His death and resurrection and all that. What's more, we think that when we achieve that belief once we have faith it somehow separates us from those who don't. We fall into the sin of believing that we're somehow better because we believe than those who don't believe. But as the philosopher Soren Kierkegaard observed, "Christianity is not a doctrine to be taught, but a life to be lived."

So, then, my question. Are we called to simply have faith and teach others to do the same? Or are we called to something **more**? Something **greater**? The Master instructs us to live out our faith each and every day. He calls us to "go, therefore and makes disciples of all nations. That pretty much means everybody! One of the marks of a Christian heart is the desire for inclusivity, to feel welcome, to ultimately be a part of a something larger. A community. A family. We all want that. We all, to one extent or another, need that. Most of us believe that we have found it here, in this church. Likewise, we want others to be a part of this family. We believe ourselves to be open and welcoming. But, as hard as it might be to admit, our attitudes and actions all too often, say otherwise.

Our own love, truth, and worship are often unconsciously based on our ability to build walls, barriers between ourselves and others to keep them out. Too often, we have this notion that tells us that we can't feel special, unless someone else feels worthless. I can only be good if someone else is bad. I can only be right if someone else is wrong. My beliefs/religion can only be true if someone else's is false. I can only get to heaven if someone else goes to hell.

But, and here's the thing, we must rid ourselves of this kind of thinking. Our heaven must be a wide one. God's certainly is! Likewise, our churches, like the woman who lost a coin, the shepherd who's lost a sheep, and the father of the prodigal son, we cannot rest when others are separated from us. The family is only happy when everyone is home. And what ultimately characterizes a genuine mature faith? It isn't how pure our churches, doctrines, and morals might be but how open our minds are and how wide the embrace of our hearts are! The faith we come here week after week to share and to celebrate isn't merely an idea. It's more than something to which we must assent. It's a way of life. A way of living and working, worshipping and fellowship, side by side, year after year, learning from one another, grappling with how to live together in unity and in generosity.

Brothers and sisters, I believe with all my heart that we tap into an extraordinary power when we come together, not only on Sundays. But anytime we come together! It's more than just being in God's presence, it's also in being in one another's presence! We will all eventually be in the literal presence of our Lord soon enough. In the meantime, we have each other. And we are all, each of us, gifts to one another. Whatever else we think we cannot do, accepting that gift and welcoming each other is something we can do. Jesus has shown us how, and it's therefore something we **must** do.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.