

Room at the Table

A Sermon for Proper 15, Year A

August 16, 2020

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I know it isn't polite to have favorites, and I promise I love all of my aunts and uncles the same, but if I'm really being honest, there's a special place in my heart for my Aunt Nell. Aunt Nell and Uncle Del had nine children, and they never turned away guests. Their small farmhouse was always bustling and while, as an introvert I found it a bit exhausting, I also adored being surrounded by so much love.

Not surprisingly, Aunt Nell learned early on how to cook for a crowd. I've doubled recipes, but only when I was cooking with Aunt Nell did I ever triple or quadruple a recipe. There was always room at the table for another cousin or friend or farmhand or random passerby.

I am not Aunt Nell. I admire and strive to emulate her hospitality, but my knee-jerk reaction to surprise additions and uninvited guests is too often one of irritation or anxiety. Instead of being happy to share the feast, I worry that there won't be enough and wish I'd had time to plan.

This week's readings talk a lot about food. There's the famine going on in Genesis, and there's a whole string of food stories in Matthew. The lectionary has been delivering our Gospel readings a bit out of order: the story we heard last week, about Jesus walking on water, actually comes a few chapters after today's reading, and next week's Gospel comes even later. In the text, today's story is sandwiched between two other familiar stories—all of them about food—and it actually acts as a hinge, a pivot point for the entire Gospel of Matthew.

First, some context: Matthew was written for a primarily Jewish Christian audience. It begins by tracing Jesus' genealogy back to Abraham, frequently references the law (and how Jesus came not to abolish but to fulfill it), and has more allusions to Old Testament material than any other Gospel.

But as we know, Jesus didn't come only for the Jewish people, only for the Israelites. Jesus came for the Gentiles, too—he came for all of us. That's how the Gospel ends—with the disciples going into all the world to preach the Gospel—but how did they get there? That's where the story of the Canaanite woman, today's story, comes in.

So, the other food stories: just before the story of the Canaanite woman is the story of the feeding of the five thousand, and just after it is the feeding of the four thousand. If you're following along with our "Bible Camp," you'll read them this week. You can probably recall a story of Jesus feeding a crowd, but did you realize these stories were different? I know I used to

jumble them all together in my head. But there's some very important, very different symbolism in each one.

The first story is the feeding of the five thousand. Jesus feeds five thousand people from five loaves of bread. Five is an important number in Judaism—it's the number of books in the Torah, the central Jewish text. When the people finished eating, there were twelve baskets left over. There were twelve disciples, yes, but also twelve tribes of Israel—another important number in Judaism.

In the later story, the feeding of the four thousand, seven loaves were used, and seven baskets collected of remainder. Seven is a number of completion and wholeness for Jews and Gentiles alike, and also evokes the seven days of creation, when God made the whole world and everything in it and called it good.

And, on top of all this, the stories take place while Jesus and his disciples are traveling, and the first took place in a Jewish region and the second in a Gentile region. The stories are at once parallels and foils for one another. One represents Jesus' ministry to the Jewish people, his own people and community of origin, and the other represents the expansion of that ministry to include all.

And right in the middle, between these two stories, is the Canaanite woman, this hard-to-read Gospel lesson. I'm going to come right out and say it: Jesus sounds like a real jerk here. First he ignores the woman's cries, prompting the disciples to ask him to send her away. Then he tells her he can't help, and when she persists, calls her a dog. That doesn't sound like the Jesus I know.

His reaction is thrown into even sharper contrast with what comes just before, the bracketed part of the reading, where Jesus erases the notion that the law is what makes us good. He's talking about Jewish purity laws, and basically turns them on their head. "It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person," he says. "To eat with unwashed hands does not defile." Instead, what defiles is what comes out of the mouth, what proceeds from the heart.

Defilement is what separates us from God. It is sin. And Jesus is saying that sin is not caused by disobeying the letter of the law but by failing the spirit of the law. It is not rules and mores that mark us as God's children, but our words and actions in the spirit of love, mercy, and hospitality.

But then in the very next scene, Jesus reacts to an outsider, someone on society's margins, just as rules and mores and social expectations would dictate—first he does not engage with her, and when he does, he does so from his position of relative power and privilege. This sounds like precisely what he was just teaching against, so what's going on here?

There are a couple of possible explanations biblical scholars give for Jesus' reaction to the Canaanite woman—perhaps he was testing her faith, or using her as an object lesson for the

disciples and the Jewish audience, a sort of parable on racism. There's also an argument that the word he used for "dogs" translates to something more like "puppies," so really Jesus was using an endearment.

These are all valid possibilities, but they all have problems—why would Jesus be *testing* a woman in distress, or *using* her as an object lesson? And a dog is still a dog, even in an endearing, diminutive form. The other possibility, one I find particularly compelling, is that here we catch a glimpse of Jesus fully human, Jesus who got irritated, who spoke too quickly, who was still discovering the scope of his mission.

We have a Jesus who did not at first respond the way we expect him to, in love and inclusion, but who, through the persistence of someone with no strength, no power, was moved to change and to choose the loving option.

As someone who strives to follow the path of Jesus, I find comfort in this example of Jesus changing his mind, because I see a lot of hope for me and for you in this example we have to follow.

We do not always say or do the right thing. Sometimes we speak or act out of selfishness or even malice. Even more often we simply live as we've been taught by our surroundings, blindly accepting the thoughts, rules, and opinions of others like ourselves, until something happens to make us aware of what we're doing and move us to change.

That something happened to Jesus in the form of a stubbornly persistent stranger. Jesus was not swayed by power or respectability or riches, but by a human being who represented the opposite of these. The Canaanite woman was not just a foreigner, but part of a people who were historic enemies of the Jewish population. She was also a woman, asking for help for her daughter—also a woman, and one who brought the stigma of demon possession into the mix. This woman had any number of social strikes against her. She made the disciples uncomfortable; they wanted her to go away, to be quiet. But she persisted.

Even when she was ignored, she persisted.

Even when she was excluded, she persisted.

Even when she was called a dog and turned away, she persisted.

She persisted because she loved her daughter, and had faith that Jesus could heal anyone. And because she persisted, Jesus turned toward her; her prayer was answered, and Jesus' ministry horizon burst open.

The walls between Jew and Gentile, between self and other, came tumbling down. Prejudices were cast away and shown false. From here on out in Matthew we will see the Gospel message stretching farther and farther.

It can be tempting to skip this story, because it is uncomfortable. It is uncomfortable because of the way Jesus treats the Canaanite woman, because of his words and actions. And for most of us, I don't think it's because we relate so strongly to the Canaanite woman. While I'm not generally one to put myself in the place of Jesus in biblical narratives—and when I do it's usually time for a good dose of humility—I really think this story makes us uncomfortable because in Jesus we catch a glimpse of ourselves.

How many times do we ignore people on the margins, people who are “other” to us, because they make us uncomfortable? Do we, like the disciples, wish Jesus would tell them to go away? I think sometimes we do.

But Jesus did not—does not—send the stranger away. And in this uncomfortable story we have the moment in Matthew when change happens. We have the revelation of the true expanse of God's love and mercy.

This message is more important now than ever. We live in a nation and a world in turmoil, and it can be hard to know what way to turn, what to do. We have an example in Jesus of one who obeys the spirit of the law by listening to the voice of the other, and—though it took many attempts—ultimately responded to the woman's need with, “Great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.”

Recall the words of our collect for today: *“Almighty God, you have given your only Son to be for us a sacrifice for sin, and also an example of godly life: Give us grace to receive thankfully the fruits of this redeeming work, and to follow daily in the blessed steps of his most holy life...”*

Here we have our call: to follow in the steps of Jesus. We have already been redeemed; now we are charged with living out abundant mercy and radical hospitality. We won't always do this perfectly, but also like Jesus we are called to learn and change and grow.

There was always room for more at Aunt Nell's table—how much more true this is for God. There is room at God's table for everyone. Our work is to throw wide the doors, to do the risky, painful, necessary work of sharing this abundant love and mercy—even when it makes us uncomfortable, even when it means checking our privilege and listening to the persistent voice of an other. Because I think a table with room for all looks a lot like the Kingdom of God.