

**Choral Holy Communion (BCP)**  
**Second Sunday of Lent**  
**I Thess.4:1-8**  
**Matthew 15:21-28**

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I don't know about you but there are times when I regret coming to church! You drag yourself away from a comfortable chair on a Sunday evening, hoping for some uplifting and beautiful music and singing, which you get; for some space to gather yourself, which you also get; and maybe some inspirational words of Scripture to get you started for the week. Well, I'm not sure on the last one, especially with our gospel reading, it feels like a story that shouldn't be there, as if someone has snuck it in to check if we're listening. Did Jesus really say ...?

This story is also found in Mark's gospel, but Matthew has changed it quite a bit, but he hasn't made it less shocking. A distraught mother comes to Jesus asking for his help, and Jesus ignores her. It's the disciples who push Jesus to respond, not because they want to help her either but because they're embarrassed about her following them and pleading. So Jesus does respond, "I've only been sent to the lost sheep of Israel." This dismissive comment has no effect on the woman, she keeps asking for help. Jesus replies with, "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."

Wait, hang on a minute, did Jesus call that woman a dog? Yes, yes he did. And even that isn't enough to put her off, "even the dogs eat the crumbs under the

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table and are satisfied.” A surprised Jesus replies, “Wow, you have faith, go, your daughter is well.”

Take in the enormity of this story. Week after week we preach in this church that everyone is welcome, that there are no barriers to coming to God in Christ. Matthew is very clear that the woman is Syro-Phoenician, a Canaanite, a gentile, outside of the covenant. Have we finally found the limits to God’s love? At first it appears that Jesus thinks we have. Scholars down the ages have wrestled with this and tried to explain away Jesus’ first response about only being sent to Israel and then his much worse second response in which he calls her a dog. They get ever more inventive. There is scope to hold that the human Jesus grew in his understanding of what the Messiah was to be. That in this encounter with this desperate mother, Jesus’ compassion and horizons were broadened.

Whatever is going on with Jesus it is clear that the woman is not taking no for an answer. She has a picture of God’s grace that is expansive and inclusive, even if that means it comes in crumbs. Immediately before this story in Matthew’s gospel was the feeding of the five thousand where the left-over

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crumbs outnumbered the original food. This woman wasn't going anywhere until she met the God she believed in.

If you've been listening carefully, you would have heard echoes of the liturgy we celebrate tonight, crumbs and tables. But even Cranmer gets it wrong in the Prayer of Humble Access, "we are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table." That's not the attitude of the woman, she wants the meal, but she'll settle for the crumbs if she still finds God's grace and healing there. We are worthy, in fact we are worthy of more than crumbs because of God's grace through Jesus Christ.

Because of her we are led to see that God is not a God of crumbs, God is a God of lavish hospitality. Lent can almost seem like a time when we are supposed to live off crumbs, but it is the time when we are led back to God's lavish abundance. In the Eucharist we are fed not with crumbs but with Christ himself, our daily bread for the journey. Like the Syro-Phoenician woman you and I are invited to be bold in claiming the grace that God holds out to us, to open our hands and to receive more than we can even ask for.