
Crumbs for a Cause

Mark 7:24-37

A Sermon preached in Page Auditorium on September 6, 2015 by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

Jesus went to the region of Tyre in what is now Lebanon and he didn't want anyone to know he was there but we learn that he "could not escape notice." He's the main attraction in this story along with the Syrophenician woman who was a mother. But there's someone else in this story that might escape our notice. She's not a headliner yet she's the one with the most need. We don't hear anything from her. She's a passive participant in this pericope. The Syrophenician woman and Jesus grab all of the attention historically. They speak while this other person never says a word, not one peep. I want to bring attention to her today—the little daughter of the Syrophenician woman who had an unclean spirit. A little girl that even the student newspaper, Duke Chronicle, has never talked about. This may not be surprising because this girl experiences the triad of marginalization of that day—she's a Gentile, a woman, and has been possessed by an unclean spirit. In other words, she's off limits to the community of humanity. No one wants to cover her story in the evening news or even in a sermon. I've never heard a sermon about her. She's not glamorous or gorgeous; she's not plastered on the front cover of Vogue magazine. There's apparently not anything really interesting about her. She's spiritually sick with this unclean spirit and you know that the sick in our society are so easily quarantined. The Syrophenician woman's daughter is a vulnerable victim and I want to be a voice for the vulnerable.

I want to be a voice for those from whom we never hear or even see day to day. Children are vulnerable. We've heard stories about the devastating abuse of children by trusted leaders in schools or churches or on sports teams or in Hollywood and how these experiences enslaved children, even into adulthood, because they were imprisoned by a secret that was never their fault. They were the victims.

Just this week a little boy, a toddler, washed up on the shores of Turkey, lifeless. Those images are heart wrenching. His shorts, his shirt, his shoes were on. His body was there but like an image from Ezekiel's valley of dry bones, there was no breath in him. He was part of a group of 12 refugees trying to reach the shores of the Greek island Kos, grasping for a better and new life. But in the pursuit of life, he found death. His little body was just lying there on the beach. I don't think I'll ever view a beach in the same way again. Other children may not be lying on a shore; they may be standing but to be honest even some of them are not breathing. I think of the children in Durham, 28% of whom live in poverty. Vulnerable victims.

At the beginning of this new school year, on September 1st, reports say that more Japanese school pupils commit suicide on that day each year than any other day; this study was done over a 40-year period. The start of a school year brings back the bad bullies, which can lead to suicide for many young people. Japan has one of the highest rates of suicide in the world, and it's the leading cause of death for those aged 15-39. Of these, around 18,000 children under the age of 18 took their lives between 1972 and 2013.

I want to hear their voice this morning but as typical, others are louder or in control of the narrative. I only hear the little girl's mother and Jesus. But at least the Syrophenician woman is not a parent who neglects her child so much so she ends up in the hands of Durham County's Child Protective Services.

This Gentile woman with no name is an advocate for her child. She approaches Jesus, who's popular in the region, and begs him to cast the demon out of her daughter. 'No' is not a satisfactory answer. Jesus already had a proven track record of healing with Jewish women, like Jairus' daughter, so she pressed Jesus to do the same for her, though she was a Syrophenician. After she makes her plea, Jesus responds, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' But she answered him, 'Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.'" She recognized the contrast

between the privileged position of Israel, the children, and the less privileged place of the Gentiles, the dogs. There are all sorts of theories of why Jesus might have said this and what he meant but we can't settle that this morning. What we can settle on is this woman's, this mother's response.

Although a dog was unclean and lower than a child in a household, the dog is still in the household. A dog, the Gentile, still gets crumbs and is part of God's kingdom and has access to bread. The Syrophenician understood the moniker of the day but didn't allow that to stop her sass. "The woman's sass saves her daughter," according to my own brother and New Testament scholar, Emerson Powery. He argues, "She may only receive a 'crumb' from the bread provider, but the leaven from that crumb develops into a survival faith that allows her to track down a foreign exorcist on behalf of her kin. Her action, indeed her word, expresses most clearly that God's reign is far-reaching even to the uttermost." Not even crumbs are wasted in the larger purposes of God. We may sweep them up and throw them in the trash as insignificant but in this setting a crumb is a boundary-crossing symbol because everyone gets to taste a piece of the bread. Thus, this mother is satisfied with crumbs even as Jesus later feeds a crowd of four thousand with what might be considered crumbs—seven loaves and a few fish.

Look at what crumbs can do. Look at what her word does—"For saying that," Jesus says, "you may go—the demon has left your daughter." Jesus heals her daughter not because of her faith but because of her argument, her words on behalf of her helpless child who had no words at the time.

This mother speaks for her child who has no voice, asking Jesus to cast out a demon and Jesus answers her plea. You would think there would be a grand angelic symphonic chorus, accompanied by golden harps to go with this healing, yet we hear no such sounds. Jesus never even goes to the girl or touches her like he does with the deaf and mute man in the story that follows this one, making this the only instance in Mark where healing occurs at a distance. The daughter appears to be free from her oppression but there's still a sense of ostracization at work. There's no party like the one thrown for the prodigal son who was lost but later found. And when the Syrophenician mother returns home she sees her "child lying on the bed" or 'thrown on the bed.' The unclean spirit is gone but this child's voice has not returned. She says nothing and looks as passive and stagnant as ever; there are no active verbs associated with her. She's just lying there, revealing somehow that she's not yet fully free.

We never hear her voice, which is true for other children in the Gospel of Mark (5:21-24, 35-43; 9:17). She lies there waiting for us to give her voice even after the traditional exorcism because there's another exorcism that needs to take place. We need to discover how to exorcize the ways we silence little vulnerable children in our society. She lies on the bed waiting for us to speak up and act on her behalf because she's still down and kept out of the public's eye, unseen and unheard. She may be healed but appears to still be hurt. We have to exorcize the ways we ignore children and keep them hidden and restricted from any meaningful participation in our systems and structures and communities. We should stop underestimating what they can teach and offer us. I'd rather have a child pray for me than an adult any day. We were all children at one point and if someone didn't speak up for us, encourage us, mentor us, put band aids on our cuts, change our diapers, feed us, teach us how to tie our shoelaces, where would we be? We might still be just lying on our bed of insignificance or washing up on shores of hope unborn.

Like the Syrophenician mother we're called to exorcize exclusionary politics or theologies or behavior. There's no room for this in the boundary-breaking, boundary-crossing kingdom of God embodied in Jesus Christ. We may even have to exorcize our own complicity in not speaking up for children, or speaking up for justice. If we don't give voice to the voiceless, as Christians, who will? We should speak up like the Syrophenician and be willing to crumble for a cause. To do what the marginalized can't do for themselves and to do it on their behalf, to use our power and privilege to protect the weak, to take risks for them, to lay our status down, to put your life and reputation on the line, even being called names like dogs and everything but a child of God. To accept a little inconvenience for the greater good, to be willing to be

made uncomfortable if it sets another person free. To be hosed down like dogs and taken to jail for the freedom of others.

Accepting crumbs because all it takes is one crumb. One crumb to see oppression crumble. One crumb for the healing of children. You don't need the whole enchilada to do something significant for yourself or someone else. We may not get the entire piece of bread but we can still share in its healing power because we still get a crumb and that's enough to shake up the tendency toward an exclusionary mentality. The woman's crumbs are for the salvation of children. And don't we want to see children saved?

Just one crumb can change someone's life. We don't need the whole loaf of bread; one little piece can bring healing. One crumb for a good cause. One crumb can give you the courage to persevere. One crumb full of faith. Small yet with a huge impact. In Jamaican patois (and I hope my Jamaican mother is not listening!), there's a saying, "Likkle but talawa." It means little but powerful. Likkle but talawa. It describes the crumbs from Christ in which we can cross over into God's promises of hope and healing with a little act of faith that swings wide open the portal of God's presence in the world, especially among children.

Lord, give us some crumbs that are enough nourishment to fill us with justice and hope for the world. Crumbs that fill us with courage to speak up for those who have no voice, so we might hear Jesus tell us one day, "for saying that—your prayers have been answered." Give us the crumbs that the mother received that we may pass on those same crumbs to those who have no advocate in life, no one to cheer them on, and who appear to be paralyzed in life. Give us crumbs as they signify how even the smallest fraction of Christ's power is necessary to usher in healing.

So don't underestimate the power of a crumb, especially when it comes from the broken body of Jesus Christ, the bread of life. God was born into the world as a baby in Bethlehem, which means the "house of bread." An incarnate God born as bread for the world. Just a little crumb from the manger, the feeding trough of God, will change your life and hopefully someone else's. Take, eat. This is his body that crumbled into pieces on the cross. And as you feed on his crumbs in faith, like the little daughter, may you be healed. Share the crumbs with the children and for the children whose voices we may never hear. We don't know what the healed daughter said when her mother came home, but I can imagine that the first thing she might have asked was, "Mom, can I have some crumbs?"