

Proper 15A, 2011

In one of the prayers in our prayer book, the prayer of humble access, there is a line that I often have difficulty reciting. This prayer is the Rite One prayer said just before communion and it says: "We do not presume to come to this thy Table, O Lord, trusting in our own righteousness..." I'm ok with that part. But the next part bothers me a lot. It says: "We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table."

It's one of those lines where as your priest I recite it along with you when we say it, but inwardly I sometimes groan. Actually, I want to shout out: Wrong! That's not right.

I am worthy to gather up the crumbs under thy Table. I need them. I want them. And if that's all I get, it is good enough. I just don't get it.

I think I have that reaction because of the gospel lesson we heard read today of the Canaanite woman and her brash encounter with Jesus. She didn't get it either. This Canaanite woman, like all the rest of us, was yearning for purpose and hope. Wasn't the gospel...the good news that Jesus brought to the world ...suppose to heal and restore...why not in her case as well?

Jesus and his disciples had left Israel on their way to the beach. Their long-awaited getaway to Tyre and Sidon (which you could compare to modern day Lebanon) was to give them breathing space from the crowds and the combative religious leaders in Israel---they needed a break. But suddenly an unnamed woman burst into their path to ask for an exorcism for her daughter. She didn't get that she wasn't suppose to do such a thing...for a Canaanite was the outsider of the outsiders. First of all, she was a woman and they didn't approach men. Good Jewish men like Jesus and his crew weren't supposed to talk a woman like her. They were told by Moses not to associate with the Canaanites, not to have anything to do with them. And especially, Moses said, don't marry them, don't let them live with you and don't pick up any of their ways.

So Jesus does as any good Jewish man of his day would have done...he ignored her. But that didn't work...she pleads, he retorts and even insults her by calling her a dog. She respects him and calls him 'Son of David': the name reserved for the coming messiah and he calls her a dog. She knew who he was, yet his closest ones didn't get it yet.

Is this the same Jesus who just fed 5000 people without checking their resumes? The same Mr. Compassionate who never turned away anyone who came to him in faith?

Jesus wants to dismiss this dog of a woman who came to him in great faith yet Jesus keeps close to him Peter, the leading apostle. And just last week didn't Jesus call Peter a man of little faith? I'm beginning to think that Jesus doesn't get it either. For what comes out of his heart and mouth is more defiling, more tarnished and tainted, than anything the Canaanite woman says or does.

But thru her persistence, thru her great faith in his ability to help, Jesus relents and the daughter is healed. Seems like Jesus' ministry went to the dogs. Or did it?

This Canaanite woman...whatever her name was...gave Jesus the greater gift that day. She helped him see that what he had been about up to this point in his ministry was not really what he was sent to do, for his work and ministry had too narrow of a definition working only among the people of Israel.

Jesus was pushed a whole new vision of his mission that day, when the dog kept nipping at his heels and wouldn't go away...no matter what dirty look his disciples sent her way, no matter what insult he himself laid on her.

She helped Jesus enormously, forcing Jesus to grow and to become more than he as yet knew himself to be. In a deep and wonderful sense this woman called Jesus towards what he must become---someone beyond all lines and exclusions and limitations. Someone...God...for the world.

And that's the beauty and challenge of this gospel story.

With God, there is no outsider, no unclean, no one that can't be heard.

NONE are beyond God's love and concern.

None.

We're all in this life together. We're all human beings in desperate need of God.

Heidi Husted wrote these words: "The day the gospel went to the dogs was the day it came to us...When Jesus opened himself up to minister to the whole world, he opened his church to the world." To *everyone* in the world.

Us to the world. The world for us. You to me and me to you. Each for the other.

With God there is a place and a grace for everyone. No exclusions. No limits.
No right behaviors or wrong behaviors. Place and grace for everyone.

But sometimes we just don't get it. Others have to think like us, or look like us, or sound like us.....too often, we just don't get it. We just don't get it. Fortunately, it is different with God.

For today in our very own hearing, Jesus brought mercy to us dogs.

May God have us meet those who stretch our patience. And may God, at the same time, stretch our hearts and minds to share at the very least, the crumbs of us they ask.

The crumbs.

No!

The feast.

That God first gives.

Amen.