

March 22: Crumbs Under the Table (Matthew 15:21-28, Mark 7:24-30)

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Welcome to “At the Table,” our Lenten series that revolves around moments in our spiritual history where God and humanity come together around the table. Each Sunday this season we’re studying passages that invite us into different experiences at the table, and exploring how we can be transformed by God’s grace and abundance. Today’s passage is challenging and somewhat disturbing, so before we settle into it, please pray with me.

Compassionate God, help us receive and be fed by your Word today. Give us the great faith of the Canaanite woman, who knew that there is always enough for all who come to your table. May we trust that we have a share in your grace and abundance, just like she did. In the name of your Son Jesus, Amen.

Three years ago, a Mexican woman named Deysi Vargas arrived at the California border with her desperately ill two-year-old daughter, Sofia*, and asked for help.¹ Sofia suffers from a serious condition called Short Bowel Syndrome, and even though her parents had moved to Mexico City to access better medical care, she was barely surviving. US Border officials rushed her to a San Diego hospital and granted temporary humanitarian asylum. Sofia was then transferred to Children’s Hospital in Los Angeles, and after more than a year of treatment, was finally released in September 2024 under close monitoring. Her mother feeds her with a gastric tube four times a day, and she is hooked up to sophisticated equipment that provides her with intravenous feeding 14 hours each day. With her IV solution in a backpack, Sofia was able to start preschool and began to thrive.

However, last spring, Sofia’s mother received letters from the DHS telling her that her humanitarian asylum was prematurely terminated. She was told to self deport immediately with her daughter or “the federal government will find you.” Sofia’s complex medical equipment could not be taken out of the country, and her doctor at the Children’s Hospital wrote that if her treatment was interrupted, “this could be fatal within a matter of days” – but because of changes in the immigration system, there was no functional way to alert officials that Sofia’s life was in danger.

¹ (*Sofia is a pseudonym to protect the child’s identity.) <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2025-05-27/deportation-trump-healthcare-immigration-humanitarian> , <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/girl-four-life-saving-treatment-at-risk-deportation-rcna209404>

So Sofia's mother, like mothers everywhere, fought for her daughter in every way she could; legally and by alerting the press. Last May, stories about Deysi and Sofia began to appear on multiple media networks, enlisting public support.

But not everyone was moved by Sofia's plight: in the comments at the bottom of different articles, I found heartbreaking opinions about why this vulnerable four-year-old Mexican girl did not merit life-saving American care:

"Why should the tax payers be on the hook for her medical care, and who is paying for the family's "legal team"? I am sorry, but you don't have a right to taxpayer resources if you are not a citizen. What about the Americans that cannot afford treatment for their children? Not our problem."

"We're not a hospital for the world. Deport her."

"Charity does not trump law."

"America first."

Our Scripture reading today is about a mother like Deysi, desperate to help her suffering daughter. Just like Deysi applied for humanitarian asylum at the US border, the Gentile mother we read about sought out the Jewish healer she believed could save her daughter and begged for his mercy. And like those ugly comments I just read, this anguished woman was told that the divine gifts Jesus offered were for the children of Israel, not for foreign "dogs" like herself and her daughter. And most distressing of all, the person those hurtful comments came from was not an internet troll, but Jesus himself.

One of my favorite Bible professors in seminary told us that there are some passages she has to wrestle with, like Jacob wrestled with God all night long in the book of Genesis, refusing to let go until God blessed him. This is one of those passages for me – I have wrestled with it. And I still don't understand why Jesus said such ugly words. What I can preach about, however, is how this passage has blessed and amazed and emboldened me. I'm convinced it reveals God's heart and intentions for a wide, inclusive table where there is more than enough to feed everyone who comes – and that the person who reveals and proclaims this truth here isn't Jesus, but a "pagan" woman who bested him in a debate and changed the trajectory of his ministry.

Before we dig into this passage, I want to back up so that we can put it in context. Jesus was a thoroughly Jewish man: a descendant of Abraham and Sarah, the couple chosen by God to start the family who would grow to become Israel, a people set apart to receive God's special blessing and self-revelation. Through covenants, God claimed Israel as a "treasured possession out of all the peoples", a "priestly kingdom and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:3-6), who would be divinely blessed in order to be a blessing to the rest of the world.

Even after the people of Israel were conquered and exiled, they clung to their identity as God's chosen nation and kept up the specific practices that marked them as Jews and covenant insiders, longing for the day when God would send the Messiah to usher them into a new age of blessing and abundance, restoring them as a Jewish kingdom that would be a light to the Gentile nations.

This is the background that Jesus, a faithful and observant Jew, grew up with. He was steeped in the history and Scriptures of his people, and they shaped how he saw himself and his ministry – he knew he was a central, keystone part of the covenant story of Israel and God. And although he didn't come to restore Israel as a literal kingdom, Jesus did inaugurate a heavenly kingdom marked by concrete signs of the Messianic abundance the prophets promised: the blind recovered their sight, the sick were healed, the dead were raised, freedom was preached to prisoners, and the oppressed were set free; water was turned into the finest of wines and a few morsels of bread and fish became more than enough food to satisfy thousands.

However, the messianic blessings of Jesus' early ministry weren't for everyone; although he lived and traveled among people of many ethnicities, Jesus' healings and miracles and teachings were specifically for the Jewish community, the covenant insiders. When Jesus chose twelve disciples to represent the twelve tribes of Israel and sent them out to proclaim the arrival of God's kingdom and do the miracles he did, he gave them clear instructions to confine their ministry to Jews: "Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel" (Matthew 10:6). There were just two exceptions: when Jesus healed a centurion's servant from afar, and when he encountered demons torturing a Gentile man and cast them into a herd of pigs, an event that prompted the man's entire town to beg Jesus to go away. Perhaps the negative reaction from that second Gentile healing confirmed Jesus' ministry strategy of going only to the lost sheep of Israel.

Today's story, which is told in Matthew 15 and Mark 7, takes place at a period in Jesus' ministry when he and his disciples were exhausted and running ragged. For days upon days, they'd been trying to get away to some solitary, quiet place – but no matter where they went, crowds of needy people found them, pleading for healing and help, which Jesus always gave.

So Jesus led his disciples away from Jewish territory altogether, traveling to the Gentile region of Tyre and Sidon in modern-day Lebanon. Old Testament scriptures describe these cities as infamous hives of corruption that were destined for destruction, and the first century Jewish philosopher Josephus described Tyrians as “our bitterest enemies.” Perhaps that made Tyre the perfect place for an escape, a setting where Jesus wouldn't feel obligated to minister, where people wouldn't know him or expect anything from him. Mark 7:24 says that Jesus “entered a house and did not want anyone to know it.”

But it was not to be. Even in Gentile territory, Mark writes that Jesus “could not keep his presence secret. In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an impure spirit came and fell at his feet” (Mark 7:25). Both Mark and Matthew make it crystal clear that this woman was not Jewish. Matthew calls her a Canaanite, an identity associated with Israel's ancient and bitter enemies; and Mark identifies her as Syrophenician, the same ethnicity as the evil queen Jezebel who led Israel to idolatry. It is hard to imagine somebody who was more of a covenant outsider, more fully “other”, than this Canaanite woman from Tyre.

Can you imagine the courage and desperation it took for her to approach a Jewish religious leader and his offensive line of male disciples who were guarding their quarterback? She was already transgressing multiple boundaries, reaching across ethnic and cultural lines, knowing that she would be despised or even hated. And by persisting in her cries for mercy and attempts to get to Jesus, even as his disciples tried to silence her, she disrupted the cultural values of silence and submission expected of women.

And here is where this story becomes so difficult and jarring. A desperate mother is crying out for help for her daughter who is “suffering horribly” (Mt. 15:22). But Jesus didn't show her any of the compassion he had previously given to Jewish women who broke boundaries to get to him. Instead, in a series of three responses to her pleas, Jesus comes across as dismissive, harsh, insulting, maybe even cruel.

Jesus' first response was to simply ignore the woman's cries – Matthew 15:23 says that "he did not say a word." Nevertheless, she persisted, and his disciples finally came to him and urged him to send her away.

Jesus second response was directed to his disciples – he answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." That's an echo of what he told his disciples when he sent them out in his name – that his message and the messianic gifts he offered were not intended for those who didn't belong to Israel.

Even when the Gentile woman heard this dismissal, she was not deterred. She came even further forward and knelt before Jesus – the Greek wording here says that she worshipped him. "Lord, help me!" she cried, using the posture and the language of the psalmists who confess their utter dependence on God.

But Jesus didn't answer her with deliverance. Instead, he gave her a short parable: "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs." And that was the harshest response of all. Think about Isaiah's prophetic table that Pastor Meg preached about two weeks ago, where the "bread" is the messianic gifts of Jesus – healing, restoration, abundance, mercy, freedom. Now imagine that your suffering daughter needs that bread, but when you approach the table, Jesus tells you you're not welcome because you're not one of the "children," the covenant members of the people of Israel. And that's not all – Jesus even dehumanizes you by repeating an ethnic slur, comparing you and your daughter to wild, scavenger dogs who don't even deserve to get bread tossed down to you. That's what this Canaanite mother heard from Jesus.

Do any of you feel a sense of discord and even horror when you imagine Jesus saying those words to a mother whose daughter was "suffering terribly"? I sure do. Are those words any different from the quotes I read earlier, from people who would deny life-saving medical care to a four-year-old because she doesn't belong to the nation of America?

We're definitely not the only people to wrestle with how Jesus reacted in this story. Some interpreters point out that it could have been worse: Jesus never silenced the woman or told her to go away, even though his disciples wanted him to. And when he likened her and her daughter to dogs, he used a diminutive term meaning "little dogs" or "doggies" that softened the insult a little. Others justify Jesus' behavior as a necessary test of the woman's faith to make sure she wasn't taking advantage of Jesus' gifts. Maybe he was intentionally provocative because he wanted her to profess her faith. Still others speculate that Jesus said those harsh things in order to teach and

challenge his disciples – he was playing devil’s advocate, repeating what the *disciples* believed so that they could see it refuted in a powerful way. And more recent interpreters see this as an example of Jesus being fully human, suggesting that he genuinely believed his messianic mission should begin with an exclusive focus on Israel; but when he recognized the truth of this woman’s word, he changed his mind.

And I’m not here to endorse or deny any of those theories, because we’re not told what Jesus was thinking, and I don’t pretend to know. But I don’t have to fully understand in order to be moved and excited about what happens next. You see, in most stories, there’s a sequence of three – three people, three bears, three instances, three statements; and the third is always the climax, the closer. And in this story, Jesus has responded three times to the woman’s entreaties. It was over, and the answer was a definitive no.

Except it wasn’t. Because this foreign, faithful, determined, defiant, spirited and Spirit-filled mother was never going to stop fighting for her daughter, and she refused to let the story end with rejection. She knew that she and her daughter were more than unclean dogs, excluded from the table of God’s mercy. She knew that there is more than enough of God’s grace for all.

And so she spoke again, to challenge Jesus’ claim that it wasn’t right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs – not by rejecting his statement or reacting to the implied insult, but by accepting the conditions of the parable and then using Jesus’ very words to prove him wrong. “Yes, it *is* right, Lord,” she said. “Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” In other words, “Even if what you’re saying, Jesus, is true and my daughter and I are dogs who don’t belong, we can still choose to come to the messianic table where the bread of God’s mercy is unlimited, where there are always leftovers. And even if we only grab a crumb of what falls under the table after everybody’s been filled, that’s more than enough to heal and free us, as well. There is no imaginable scenario in which God’s table won’t have enough for all who approach it, no matter who they are.”

Now, there’s only one occasion in the whole Bible where Jesus is bested in a debate, where he concedes that somebody’s counter-argument wins and changes course – and that is right here. “‘Woman, you have great faith!’” Jesus exclaims in the Matthew version of the story. “‘Your request is granted.’ And her daughter was healed at that moment” (Mt. 15:28). This woman is the only person in Matthew that Jesus ever credits as having *great* faith.

In the Mark version of the story, Jesus responds with a different commendation: “For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter” (Mk 7:29). That doesn’t sound as affirming, until you realize that the Greek word translated “reply” here is *logos*, or Word, the term Mark uses again and again to refer to the gospel message of salvation that Jesus preaches. In this story, though, Jesus says that a Gentile woman brought the Word, that a covenant “outsider” proclaimed the message of truth. “For such a *logos*, you may go.”

And the Word this woman brought seems to have changed the trajectory of Jesus’ ministry. Listen to Mark 7:31, the verse that comes directly after the one about the woman’s daughter being healed: “Then Jesus left the vicinity of Tyre and went through Sidon, down to the Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis.” The Decapolis was a Gentile region, where Jesus began doing the same kind of healing, liberating kingdom work for Gentiles that he had been doing for Israel. Before his encounter with the Canaanite woman, Jesus fed 5000 Jewish men, plus women and children; and after his encounter with her, he repeated the miracle in Gentile territory, feeding over 4000 Gentile men, plus women and children, with seven basketfuls of broken pieces left over, demonstrating that there really is more than enough bread for everybody to come to the table, eat their fill, and even leave some crumbs behind.

[This painting](#) by Michael Cook is called *Crumbs of Love*, and it’s inspired by this story. In it, the Canaanite woman’s daughter is whole and healed and at the table, and she’s sharing her bread with a literal dog on the ground. She’s held by her mother, whose head is tilted towards her daughter but whose eyes look straight at us, questioning us, challenging us: what do we believe? What will we do?

We live in a world in which there are many different “tables” laden with valuable resources and privileges that are reserved exclusively for insiders. Those tables can be nations, like our own, but they can also be organizations, clubs, unions, gangs, religions, the military, churches, friend groups, families – the list goes on and on. Many of these tables accept or reject based on identity markers like gender, ethnicity, wealth status, citizenship, education level, sexual orientation, religion, or age. I turned 50 in January, and have already been invited to take my seat at the prestigious AARP table!

And I'm not arguing that it's always bad for a group or table to draw boundaries or reserve resources for insiders. I think we all know, however, how much it hurts to approach a table and be rejected, or to beg for bread and be sent away, empty-handed and hungry. Some of those hurts go deep, and sometimes they stick with us our whole lives long. And even if we're not the ones who are needy, it is infuriating to see a table stockpiled with uneaten bread when we know it could give life or health to those who desperately need it but don't have the right identity markers to claim it.

But here's the thing about God's table, the truth that this Canaanite woman knew and insisted on: it doesn't belong to any particular ethnicity or gender or nation or denomination or people of a particular sexual orientation. It belongs to God, who is boundlessly good to all and has compassion on all he has made, who opens his hand to satisfy the desires of every living thing (Ps. 103:9, 16). If we're already sharing in the bounty of God's table, we don't need to protect its boundaries or police access to it in fear that somebody might take advantage or grab what they don't deserve. There's no need to hoard bread, to withhold grace or forgiveness or mercy or healing. And there's no reason to hold back from boldly reaching out for what we need and eating our fill. If even a crumb underneath God's table is sufficient, then there is no conceivable scenario in which there won't be enough left for us or those we love. Freely we have received, freely we can give.

I believe Jesus already knew this when he went to Tyre. He knew his mission would open up God's table far beyond the borders of Israel. But until the Canaanite woman approached him, this expansiveness hadn't yet become a lived reality in his ministry. And afterwards, it was. And whether Jesus was playing devil's advocate or testing the woman's faith or genuinely learning from her, what his disciples saw and remembered from this encounter was that a brazen Canaanite woman bested their rabbi in a debate, schooled him about the unlimited abundance of God's table, and changed his mind and ministry. They saw her pushing to expand the borders of the kingdom Jesus was inaugurating. They beheld Jesus ceding some of the power he held to admit that her argument trumped his. And as a result, her voice, her faith, and her witness were amplified in a way that wouldn't have true if Jesus had simply made an exception and quietly healed her daughter.

Jesus' interaction with this woman is *not* a useful example of how to respond to a desperate mother with a suffering daughter. But it is a powerful example

of what it looks like for a leader to learn and change from an outsider who breaks boundaries and conventions to approach them. It's a particularly powerful challenge for those of us who already have a seat at a table and have some control over its resources. May we be open to the arguments of those who challenge us, who point out our blind spots and the exclusivity we might not even realize we're practicing. Instead of being defensive, may we be willing to have our minds and hearts and actions changed. May we amplify the voices of those who point out where we're wrong, instead of silencing them. If Jesus, our Lord and Messiah, can cede his power to a "despised" outsider and allow her to change his mind and ministry, then surely we can, too.

And if you identify most closely with the woman in this story; if you or someone you love has approached tables and been rejected, or if you are desperate for healing or freedom or bread that's been denied to you, may you be encouraged and emboldened by her great faith, tenacious persistence, and refusal to be diminished or dehumanized. Don't give up. The story's not over yet.

Thankfully, the story isn't over for Deysi Vargas and Sofia, either. Because of Deysi's advocacy and persistence, DHS granted them a year of humanitarian parole and Sofia continues to receive medical treatment she needs. That year of parole ends this May, and I pray that they won't have to fight again to access the bread and mercy and inclusion they need for Sofia to be well and flourish. There is enough. May we hold to that truth as doggedly as the Canaanite woman of Tyre. Amen.