

*“Crumbs Under the Table”*

*Isaiah 35:4-7a; Mark 7:24-37*

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*Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut*

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Welcome! One of the privileges of being the pastor, even though I am one of the newest kids on the block speaking—in some cases—to four generations of Mary Taylor Church families, is to say “Welcome!” Whether you are back from a summer away or “back” in the sense of the start of Sunday School and Adult Choir and Bell Choir and acolytes and crucifers and Confirmation, September signals a new and, I trust, exciting start to our year of program ministry. To all, welcome to this community.

Fact is, everyone likes to be welcomed. And Mary Taylor does a good job of it. This week I met with a couple planning to get married next spring. Generally speaking, I will expect couples whose weddings I perform to join us regularly in worship. Maybe we are the right church for them or maybe not, but one cannot know that without worshipping. The bride-to-be came first, alone, and one of the things she was most impressed by is your ability to identify her as a guest and warmly welcome her. This Mary Taylor mug is, by her testimony, now a treasured vessel!

It is good that we have this strength, for we have welcoming work to do! The world is not always a welcoming place. I brought an administrative problem this week to the Conference health benefits administrator concerning my health coverage. Sally is wonderful but only 11 months into the position. I welcomed her enthusiastically when she arrived, and I hated to be one of her “cases” now. In the course of the conversation I said, *“It must be a great job except for people like me, with problems.”* You know what she said? *“I’ve worked in other settings and I’m really glad to be in a place where the staff really cares about each other.”* What a wonderful testimony to our conference staff!

It got me to thinking about us, this church community. How are we welcoming one another, those who are already here. I believe we still have work to do. Aisles to cross. Bridges to build. Repentance and forgiveness need to be offered and received. It's true wherever there are people, and especially after times of conflict. Healing takes time.

That leads us to consider who belongs in the community. It's easy to say "everybody." I say it, you say it. We say it on our masthead: "*Whoever you are, wherever you are on your spiritual journey, you are welcome here.*" We say, and believe, this truth in all sincerity. Yet it's harder to live: which brings us to the Gospel.

I wish it didn't. It didn't use to. It used to begin with verse 31, the wonderful story of the healing of the deaf man. But then some wiseguy said, "*You know, preachers don't have it tough enough. Let's add verses 24-30.*" The text is tough enough that, according to the Interpreter's Bible, it is "one of the most difficult sections of the Gospel." (1) Because of that I invite you to follow it with me in the pew Bible, page 917. If you'd like to take notes there's a page in the bulletin for that, too. Either way, this manuscript will be on-line this week.

Why is this scripture tough? Jesus seems to show prejudice. The Gospel writer Mark, in his inimitable way, does not sugar-coat Jesus' humanity, and it contrasts sharply with the way many of us view Jesus' divinity as a perfect person, the Son of God.

Let's set the stage for what happened. Jesus' ministry has been primarily in the area we would today call northern Israel and nearly exclusively to Jews, of which he was one. Despite that, he is rejected by the Jews of his own hometown, Nazareth, in chapter 6. So when we get to today's reading, he has been rejected by his hometown, suffered the beheading of his cousin, John the Baptist; fed the five thousand; walked on water; healed the Gerasene demonic (an emotionally disturbed Gentile person) and argued with block-headed religious leaders. Whew! (1) Interpreter's Bible, p. 754

Jesus needs a break. He gets out of Dodge to a place he thinks he won't be recognized (verse 24) but can't escape it (verse 25). One has to wonder a little bit about his choice of get-away. It wasn't just Gentile territory. It was Tyre, on the coast of the Mediterranean, in present-day Lebanon in an area known as Phoenicia. The Phoenicians had been enemies of Jesus' ancestors, swooping down from the coast to pillage and destroy. So he's recognized (verse 26) and approached by a Gentile woman.

So here we are, three cultural strikes and you're out before the conversation even begins. Strike one: she is a woman. A traditional morning prayer during the time of Jesus was to thank God that one was not born a Gentile, a slave or a woman. Strike two: she approaches Jesus unbidden. Proper women simply did not do that. Strike three: she is a Gentile (see strike one).

What she asks is healing for her daughter. What Jesus says (verse 27) is "*Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.*" Ouch! Some scholars argue that Jesus was being ironic, for he had already healed the Gerasene demoniac. Others argue it was a test of her faith. Either way, it's not exactly the kind of pastoral care we would normally attribute to the "Good Shepherd;" and at least one scholar observes that such explanations are "questionable."

What to do? I have an alternate view that links Jesus, the woman's response, and us. Here it is. What we say every Christmas, and in the Nicene Creed, is that Jesus was "truly human:" born of Mary, in a stable, grew up in a family, worked in the family business, gave his parents apoplexy when they lost him in the temple at age 12, and all the rest. Being human is complicated. Now fast forward to today's reading. The Syrophenician woman responds to Jesus (verse 28) by saying "*Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.*" And Jesus says (verse 29) "*For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.*"

I believe Jesus had a wake-up call. Divinity, like humanity, is complicated. Jesus said to his followers “...*the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these...*” (John 14:12). I believe Jesus understood his mission in a new way. In the second half of today’s Gospel he goes to the Decapolis, a Gentile area, to resume his ministry.

So what does this mean for us? It means that if even Jesus stumbles in welcoming the “other,” the person different, so will we. Like Jesus, then, we need to be ready to change our ways; grow up into our full humanity and our full divinity; and examine, from the perspective of the “other,” what it is like to be left out. There is an ample helping of the Golden Rule—“*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*” (Luke 6:31)—at this table.

Like the Syrophenician woman, we sometimes need to assert our place at the table when others, however powerful and influential, say we do not belong. There is an ample helping of our divine lineage—“*For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God*” (Romans 8:14)—at this table.

Like so many who have gone before us, if we look inside and truly reflect on our life’s journey we will remember when we, too, were told we were not welcome. Wrong side of town. Wrong color, culture, sexual orientation, gender. Too slow. Too bright. Too nerdy. Too fat. Too thin. Too religious. Too kind. Yet there is an ample helping of welcome—“Jesus said, ‘*Anyone who comes to me I will never drive away*’” (John 6:37)—at this table.

These portions are so ample that even the crumbs under the table are enough to feed us. Enough to empower us. Enough to energize us on behalf of others. So in the final chapter we live so boldly, so extravagantly, so victoriously, that the crumbs become a banquet and the welcome that we desire to receive is the welcome we are bold to extend. To those we love easily and those who, as followers of the Christ, we are commended to love. All are welcome. “All” means “all.” No exceptions. Amen.