

RUNNYMEDE UNITED CHURCH

The 14th Sunday after Pentecost, September 6, 2009 am

'Crumbs Are Not Enough'

James 2: 1-10. 14-17; Mark 7: 24-37

David's gracious introduction did not mention Tonka, our family dog. We found him last September after I spent a sabbatical's final week researching hypo-allergenic dogs and Southern Ontario's animal rescue network. Then, we set out to Peterborough to find Tonka, a Border Terrier whose life seemed to have been one of loss and pain.

Tonka's name – the only identity he carries from his birth 3 years ago – not only means toy truck, but in the Sioux-Dakota language conveys 'great' or big. Since he's not big, we think he's great: devoted to his new family, fiercely protecting us from imagined assaults, greeting me when I return with a proud proclamation that the force of his yearning has brought me home. He has what are called 'abandonment' issues, but we've watched him grow in trust – at mealtimes, becoming a soft presence under the table, pounding his tail in contentment, but ready to leap if any morsel falls upon the floor. For Tonka, crumbs under our table are a source of delight.

Some of you are pet lovers; others, not. For either group, it may seem self-indulgent of me to tell a tale of one of my pets this first Sunday with you. But I beg your tolerance; Tonka has a homiletical urgency this morning that I hope will become clear. Tonka, under our table, provides a clue to understanding a story about Jesus that can seem baffling.

Was Jesus trying to get away from it all by heading to the region of Tyre, across the border from Galilee, away to a place with no cell-phone access, no e-mail, too far for a pager to call him back? Was he seeking one last summer weekend before fall's desperate urgency hit? Tyre is get-away country: a bed-and-breakfast in a place where no one recognizes you and you can rest.

But such places, this story reminds us, are where the boundaries of familiar and foreign intersect, where histories and cultures meet and challenge one another, blurring the edges of "us" and "them". Sometimes, when we travel to a new place, we learn to see the world in a new way. So it was for Jesus.

For a woman comes to find him, to fall at his feet, to seek his healing love for her daughter. The incident is unique in the gospels.

The woman is a Gentile: by birth, Syrophenician; by religion, probably Canaanite. Such descriptions conjured up ancient memories of idolatry, war, suffering; they made her seem 'pagan', a source of impurity from which 'good' people should keep a distance. For all of this, not to speak of her gender, she would be despised by a Jewish man. But, persistent and unrelenting, ignoring restrictions on women addressing a man, she is willing to endure humiliation for her child. Jesus' fame has gone ahead of him; she knows she needs to ask him for help.

Some who hear this story are bewildered by what they sense is Jesus' unkind treatment of the woman: "Let the children be fed first. It is not right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

Scholars point out that people of Israel were not pet-lovers. Tonka would have found no home in Nazareth. Dogs roamed streets in dirty packs, scrounging for food. Cleanliness laws meant they were not allowed in the house, certainly not near the table. Nor would bread, meant for children, be thrown outside to such wild animals.¹

Dogs, then, provided a ready image of insult for Gentiles, those outside the house of Israel; out of such a linguistic understanding Jesus speaks what seem to be harsh words of rejection. His bread is for the children of Israel, not for the dogs outside. What is his tone? Is he irritated? Compassionate but unwilling to give in? Apologizing or asserting a hard truth? Is he tired: overwhelmed with the magnitude of ministry in Israel, unwilling to take on urgent needs outside its borders?

Whatever its motive, the harshness of his reply has hammered many; Martin Luther said of this woman that she had to endure "hard knocks" before she received help.

Today's faithful find it difficult to understand what Jesus is saying. After all, we are Gentiles. But scholars accept that there was a period when Jesus felt his mission was only to his own people, that it took time, interpretation, before the good news included others.

The woman was undaunted. Her daughter's life was everything; in the face of rejection, she refused to be refused. Some Gentiles kept pet dogs who, like Tonka, were fed scraps of food under the table. She responds to Jesus out of her own experience, with quick wit. If Jesus wanted to speak of dogs, the woman was prepared to beg like one.

And she found her way, insisting that Jesus was open to hear God's will anew. With little to lose, she said, "Even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

It's not a mean response; one might call it despondent. The woman is right: dogs do eat crumbs that fall under the table. In saying that, she's not being arrogant nor demanding: all she wants is a few of the leftovers. Does she hit a nerve in Jesus: he shared his table, was open to almost everyone?

But he'd omitted the woman. A woman from the borderlands, an intruder into his peace, becomes God's bearer of truth to Jesus. Her faith helped Jesus hear a new word from God, to venture beyond familiar voices of teaching and tradition, as he would continue to do. Because her desperate need could not wait, Jesus extended God's table to this woman.

After this encounter, who could be denied access to God's blessings because of race, ancestry, gender or culture? Jesus moves from the woman to meet and heal another outsider, a man judged, like the Gentile woman, to be doubly outcast because he was both hearing and speech impaired and thus could neither receive nor utter God's word. But the woman's daughter was healed and the man's tongue set free, and immediately thereafter, Jesus moves on to the feeding of the multitudes, suggesting that God's table has been extended so that all may eat, not crumbs, but loaves.

Perhaps it is hard to hear this story because we forget Jesus' humanity. Our worship emphasizes the divine in our Christ. But for me the most compelling part of this story is its honesty. Jesus does not appear here in the best light. But he comes to a turning – towards an enlarged understanding of God's great grace. Here IS the Christ who knows

us as we are, who shares our humanity: our fatigue, our questions, yes, even our biases of race, religion and culture. And here is the One who heals us. It is a hard story, but it is great good news.

Whose outsider's voice cries for help in our midst, whose plea extends our understanding of God? The Syrophenician woman kneels at our feet. How do we respond?

We can recognize this story's truth: we all identify with those of our own culture and community. Call it identity or call it prejudice: we need to know that it exists in every one of us. It is so powerful that Jesus had to struggle to recognize it, so ingrained that it can block out a compelling cry for compassion.

Who is the Syrophenician woman? She is anyone who calls to us from the borderlands of our lives, to remind us that crumbs are not enough. As her cry long ago shattered Jesus' holiday peace, so may she shatter ours. She is the refugee, the homeless, the differently abled, the lonely, the street youth, a woman in peril at a border crossing. She is you and she is me.

Can we remember that we are all children of God, called, in words we will sing: 'to build a bridge of care/ join hands across the nations, finding neighbours everywhere'? As our children begin this year's journey to know God better, may we open ourselves to God's grace. Tonka would bark, 'yes'. Amen....

Lillian Perigoe

1. For commentaries on the Syrophenician woman and Jesus, see Wahlberg (1975), Craddock et al (1996), Newsom and Ringe (1996), Malbon (2001) among others.