



Lectionary 20, Year A

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12th Sunday after Pentecost:

Gospel Text – Matthew 15:[10-20] 21-28

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Note: This sermon focuses on Matthew 15:21-28. It is appropriate to read only these verses during worship.

[¹⁰[Jesus] called the crowd to him and said to them, “Listen and understand:¹¹ it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.” ¹²Then the disciples approached and said to him, “Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?” ¹³He answered, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. ¹⁴Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit.” ¹⁵But Peter said to him, “Explain this parable to us.” ¹⁶Then he said, “Are you also still without understanding? ¹⁷Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach and goes out into the sewer? ¹⁸But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. ¹⁹For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. ²⁰These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.”]

²¹ Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²² Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." ²³ But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." ²⁴ He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." ²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." ²⁶ He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." ²⁷ She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." ²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed from that moment.

SERMON TEXT:

In my grandmother's small house stood a large wooden dining table. It wasn't there for decoration. It was the center of our family's life. Nearly everything important happened around that table. We gathered there to plan family celebrations and vacations. We played countless rounds of Uno and Tripoley. We held coloring contests there. And every Sunday afternoon, we shared a meal together.

As the oldest granddaughter, it was often my job to set the table. First came the table pads and the tablecloth. Then the plates. The napkins folded into perfect triangles. Then the silverware. "The fork goes on the left," my grandmother would remind me. "The knife and spoon go on the right...but nobody cares as long as everyone has everything." Finally, I would make my rounds through the house, asking each person the same question: "What would you like to drink?"

Whenever my grandmother needed help, the phone would ring, and I would hear her voice say, "It's time to set the table." I'd pull on my shoes and run down one hill and up another to her house. The kitchen was always warm, filled with the smell of meat, fresh bread, and whatever had been simmering all morning. Pots bubbled on the stove. Timers buzzed. Every surface seemed to hold another bowl or baking dish. Dinner was almost ready, so the table had to be set.

One afternoon, when I was still very young, Grandma called earlier than usual. "Guests are coming," I heard her say. "I need your help resetting the table."

"Resetting the table?" I had no idea what that even meant, but you didn't question Grandma. You just came.

When I arrived, she was already standing at one end of the dining room table.

"Hold on tight," she said.

I grabbed my end.

Without another word, she yanked back with all her might.

With a loud thump, the table split open right in the middle.

I froze.

I didn't know a table could do that.

Now I could see what had been hidden—a sturdy metal rail running down the center, designed to allow the table to expand.

Grandma disappeared into a dusty closet and came back carrying a long wooden board. She set it carefully into the opening, lining up the notches just so.

"Keep holding," she said.

Then, with one firm shove, she slid the two halves back together until the table was whole again—only now a bit longer.

She looked at me and smiled.

To her, it must have seemed perfectly ordinary.

But to me, it felt like some sort of domestic magic.

I had just discovered that the thing that seemed most fixed and unchanging in our family had been designed all along to open up and make room for more people.

"There is no place for you at the table."

That seems to be the message Jesus, and the disciples are sending to the Canaanite woman. First, they ignore her. Then they try to silence her. Finally, they attempt to send her away.

There are, of course, cultural reasons for their behavior. The encounter takes place in the region of Tyre and Sidon—Gentile territory. She is a Canaanite, a member of a people long

regarded as Israel's ancient enemies. She is an outsider, considered ritually unclean. And, by every appearance, she isn't part of Jesus' mission. Jesus says that he was *"sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."*

As if those barriers were not enough, she is also a woman. In that culture, women's voices were often ignored, interrupted, or dismissed altogether. Everything about this encounter seems to say the same thing: there is no place for you at the table. And that is troubling to hear from Jesus.

But what fascinates me most about this story is how utterly undeterred this woman is by the clear message that there is no place for her.

Surely she knew the barriers standing between them. She knew he was a Jew and she was a Canaanite. She knew he observed the purity laws, and she was considered unclean. She knew he was a man, and she was a woman. She even heard him say, *"It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."*

That line was meant to end the conversation. It was meant to send her away.

So why does she keep coming? Why does she refuse to leave? Why does she stand there, absorbing the insults, clinging to the hope that God's grace is more expansive than the boundaries everyone else has drawn?

She does it because she is a mother.

She is the mother of a sick child.

And parents of sick children will do just about anything if they believe it might make their child well.

She believes Jesus can heal her daughter.

She isn't pleading for herself. She is pleading for her daughter.

Love has a way of making us brave. It gives us the courage to keep knocking on doors that seem closed, to keep asking when others tell us, "No," and to trust that mercy is still possible even when every sign says otherwise.

So she stands there, desperately holding on to the edge of the table, and says, *"Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."*

In other words: I know there isn't a place for me at your table. Just give me the crumbs. Even the crumbs will be enough.

And Jesus sees her.

"Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish."

And her daughter is healed.

But this story is bigger than the healing of one child.

It is the resetting of the table.

It is as if Jesus reaches out, grabs hold of the other end of the table—the very table she has been desperately clinging to—and pulls with all his might.

With a loud crack, God's table splits open right down the middle.

Then, quietly, a leaf is slipped into the opening.

The table grows longer.

Suddenly, there is room for the Canaanite woman and her daughter.

Room for Gentiles.

Room for outsiders.

Room for people who had been told all their lives, "There is no place for you."

And I don't pretend to know whether Jesus always intended to heal her, or whether this woman's extraordinary faith moved him to extend God's grace beyond the boundaries that had defined his ministry until that moment. But I do know this: the mission is never quite the same.

Because now everyone has seen what God's table can do.

It can open.

It can expand.

It can make room for more people.

And once you've seen a table do that, you can never look at it the same way again.

Why would you want to?

Soon Jesus is sending the disciples out to do what they have just watched him do—to extend the table until there is room for people of every race, ethnicity, gender, and nation. They will cross borders. They will eat with Gentiles. They will baptize the Ethiopian eunuch. They will welcome Roman centurions. Again and again, they will discover that the Holy Spirit has a habit of sending them to people they never expected to meet and places they never imagined they would go. They become experts at resetting the table.

Imagine what would happen if the church became as good at resetting tables as it is at setting them. We know how to arrange the plates. We know where the forks go. We know where people sit. We know the traditions. But do we trust in the expansiveness of God's grace? Do we remember that Jesus is always grabbing hold of the other end of the table and pulling? Do we believe that God's table was designed from the very beginning to expand? It was built to grow.

Jesus is the one who expands the table. There is always enough grace for one more. Perhaps our calling is simpler than we imagine. When Jesus opens the table, we run to the closet and find another leaf. And when there isn't another leaf... maybe it's time to build one.

Because there is always someone still standing at the edge of the table: the lonely, the grieving, the one who feels invisible, the person struggling with addiction, the child whose family has never been part of a church, the neighbor who has been told—by the church or by the world—that something about who they are means there will never be room for them.

If Jesus were to pull open the table today and ask you to find another leaf, whose place would you help prepare?

I used to believe that my grandmother's table was strong because it was sturdy. But that wasn't what made it remarkable. What made it strong was that it had been built from the very beginning to grow. And my grandmother knew it. She knew that if she peeled a few more potatoes, browned another pound of hamburger, or baked one more pie, there would be enough for whoever showed up.

Perhaps that's what Jesus has been trying to teach us all along. The kingdom of God isn't threatened by one more chair. The table doesn't become weaker when it grows longer. It becomes a better reflection of the One who built it.

So when Jesus grabs hold of the other end of the table this week, don't resist.

Run to the closet.

Find another leaf.

Because someone is coming for dinner.

Amen.

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