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Crumbs

I remember the first time we went on vacation with my parents after our daughter Libbie was born. She was just beginning to eat solid food and my mother had brought a big box full of gigantic crumbly fresh baked muffins for all of us to enjoy. That first morning together as we finished our muffins and began to get up from the table, my mother looked at the floor beneath our daughter's booster seat, and then she looked at me with what I can only describe as shock and dismay. As she said, "oh my, Katherine, does she always make such a mess." Looking for myself under Libbie's seat I too felt that same sense of astonishment. As initially I had been impressed by Libbie's consumption of the muffin, I now realized the majority of it never made it to her mouth but to the floor beneath her seat. Now, audibly wondering aloud, why I had never seen her make such a mess at the table. Until I remembered our dogs. Our live action vacuum cleaners, and childrens messy food cleaner uppers, whom we call Radar and Sissy and who were not with us on our trip. As it showed.

While I love our dogs, and hold them to be members of our family, missing them terribly that day, I would hope I would never equate or name another as a dog. Even though somehow we come today to our story of the Syrophenician woman, whom Jesus does call a dog. Which is certainly more shocking, and dismaying than the mess my daughter made on the floor at the breakfast table that day. Because, this is Jesus we are talking about, the Son of God, the Messiah of the World, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. What do we do with this shocking, maybe even disturbing story, of a woman coming to Jesus in desperation to have her little daughter healed, only to hear, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Especially considering this story is found within our Gospels, our Good News story!

While I was in seminary I got to know people from all walks of life. We had students that ranged in age from early 20's to late 60's, some right out of college and others beginning their second or third careers. We had students from Hawaii and the Philippines to Israel and Uganda. And, while our class size was no bigger than 60 students, it wasn't hard to say that it was, for the most part, fairly vast and varied. As we welcomed students from all over the country and the world we, as the student body, tried to ensure that everyone felt welcome, and had a seat at the proverbial and literal dining table. Which was how I got to know a young woman from South Africa. As she and I shared time and space at meals, in classes, and on trips I began to listen to her stories and she began to share more and more of her journey with me. One day I asked what it was like coming to the U.S. As she began to express her enjoyment of our seminary and yet her longing to be home in South Africa she shared this story with me. On her first day in the U.S. after spending well over 20 hours in travel, my friend had arrived and was greeted by a family who would be her host until the dorms at the seminary opened a few days later. As she exited the airport and got into their car, the host mother stated she needed to pick up a few items from the grocery store, and asked my friend if she would mind. Of course she said that was fine, and asked if she could wait outside and get some fresh air, after all her hours of traveling. As my friend sat outside there was a dog tied to the post of the store sitting near her. And as people came in and out of the store, my friend noted, every single person greeted, spoke to, and/or petted and

touched the dog, while not one single person glanced at, waved, or said a single word to my friend. That, she said, is how her time in U.S. has felt, as if she were not even as noticeable or as worthy as a dog.

Throughout the centuries various Biblical commentators have tried to compensate for or even water down our story of the Syrophenician woman. Stating things like, Jesus was not calling her a dog but a puppy, as a term of endearment. Biblical historians have even worked to find reasons why these would not be the words of Jesus. But, overall the coneses is, Jesus said these words. And, while it may not be easy to stomach, there is still something worth savoring in our Gospel passage. Because if Jesus is the one who has come to show us what it not only means but looks like to embody both the divinity of God and the frailty of humanity, here we see how both can be true at the same time. And, more so how this truth calls us to change, to repent, to turn our hearts and minds. Because in this moment, after calling her a dog, the Syrophenician woman turns to Jesus and says to him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Moving Jesus not only to change his mind and heal her daughter, but his entire mission, as we find in the next chapter and feeding of the 4,000 as Jesus makes enough bread for 7 baskets leftover, for the 7 Gentile kingdoms.

Which is all to say, without the Syrophoenician woman I do not know that we would be here today. Because without her, as Jesus points out clearly in this passage, his mission was focused and directed towards the Israelites and the Israelites alone. And yet, here in this moment, this gentile woman changed not only Jesus' mind, but his message as well. Allowing the Gospel to move beyond one people, one faith, one culture, now expanding to encompass any and all societies, cultures, space and time. And so, today I wonder how much more can we be changed by our ability, like Jesus, to listen to the calls of those around us. The ones, the like the Syrophenician woman, and my friends from seminary, who call us to look beyond ourselves, beyond our notions of who is in and who is out, of what is right and what is wrong, of where God resides, so that we might finally see where God has been, waiting and ready this whole time. Holding close to our hearts not only Jesus' ability to change his minds, but the woman's ability to do it with crumbs, like the ones on the floor under my daughter's booster seat, calling us to pay attention to what we may have been missing all along.