

Do You Have a Place at the Table?

Matthew 15:21-28 (Pentecost 13)

Last weekend, I had the privilege of attending a family wedding. It was a wedding that was supposed to happen back in May, but was moved because of gathering restrictions in place at the time. The ceremony was held outside overlooking a lake. It was a beautiful day for that kind of celebration. When the wedding was over and the reception was going to begin, we had to find a place to sit, but that was easy. Everyone had a card with our names on them and a table number telling us where the bride and groom wanted us to sit for the reception. We had places at the table that evening as we celebrated their marriage.

Today we aren't focusing on weddings or food, but we are focusing on a specific table where God's mercy is given out to those who have places at that table. The last couple of weeks we have seen Jesus at Capernaum by the Sea of Galilee. Now we see him withdraw from that area. Recent events prompted him to seek some quiet time with his disciples. Matthew speaks of some of those events. News of John the Baptist's beheading, an attempt to make Jesus a king after feeding more than five thousand people, and the growing opposition of the Pharisees seem to be the reason Jesus wanted this time away with his disciples. So they went northwest toward the area of Tyre and Sidon to get away from it all. It was a region where the people who lived there were Gentiles. They were not Jews. Yet news still spread that a miracle worker from Galilee was there.

It was somewhere in that region Jesus encountered a Gentile woman, a native of that area who sought him out. Matthew tells us that she is Canaanite. This woman came seeking something from Jesus. It wasn't food or material things. She came seeking a place at the table of his mercy. Today as we focus on the interaction between Jesus and this Canaanite woman, I want you to consider this question: "Do you have a place at the table of God's mercy?"

When this woman approached, her petition was a humble cry for mercy. It was a plea for her daughter's deliverance. **"Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David! A demon is severely tormenting my daughter?" (vs. 22)** Whatever this woman understood of Israel's hopes, whatever she knew about the promised Savior, one thing is clear: She believed Jesus to be that Savior. She believed that he could and would help her. So in her need, she confidently pleaded for Jesus to have mercy on her by driving the demon out of her daughter.

Before you can answer if you have a place at the table where God gives out his mercy through Jesus, a little self-evaluation is needed. Do you have a need to be at that table today? We can fool ourselves into thinking that we don't need to be at that table. We don't need God's mercy. We lead a good enough life. Compared to others we seem to be doing okay. Even if we know we make mistakes and do things that are wrong, at least we can balance out any sinful things by doing more good things. Maybe at one point we needed it, but not today. When we start to think that way, we don't see a need for God's mercy today. Or do we?

Every day when we look at ourselves we do see a need for God's mercy. No matter how good our life might look or how much we think the good things we do balance out the bad, the sins we do every day are still there. We can't get rid of them. So like this woman who came seeking Jesus' mercy, we have nowhere else to turn. "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner." That is our humble plea. We need a place at that table. Like that woman we come trusting Jesus to be the one through whom God shows mercy on us to deliver us from our sins. Yet also, like this woman, we understand that we shouldn't have a place at that table, the table of God's mercy.

It may have looked like her faith in Jesus was misplaced. It seemed like Jesus wasn't going to help since he just kept walking and didn't say anything. Yet she followed Jesus with that persistent, confident faith. This bothered the disciples. Maybe they were embarrassed by her pestering. Maybe they wanted to preserve Jesus' privacy and make sure he had the quiet time he wanted. No matter what their reason was, they urged Jesus to dismiss her. Finally Jesus spoke, but he didn't answer either request. He simply affirmed that his personal ministry was to the Jews. **"I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel," (vs. 24)** he said. Jesus' commission called for his work chiefly to be carried out in Israel among the Jews and then that work would be carried out to all the world through the preaching of the Gospel.

Yet not even this stopped her from seeking Jesus' mercy. Why didn't she give up and go away? Did she sense that Jesus' words were not an absolute refusal to help her? Was her need too great and her faith too strong for her to give up now? She persisted even throwing herself at Jesus' feet pleading, "Lord, help me!"

Jesus replied to this persistent plea, but on the surface this reply was anything but encouraging. **"It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to their little dogs."(vs. 26)** That makes sense. Of course it isn't fitting or proper to take food that is meant for the children of the household and give it instead to the pet dogs. Dogs, even as pets, are not the same as children. Children sit at the table and have a place at the table. Dogs sit under it. So what did Jesus seem to be saying to this woman? It would not be proper, then, to take Israel's blessings away from them and give them to those who are not Israelite.

Sounds like Jesus is shutting the door on this Gentile woman saying that she doesn't have a place at his table of mercy, but that wouldn't be consistent with what he says at other times. Yes Jesus came for the lost sheep of Israel, but he said in John 10, **"I also have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. Then there will be one flock and one shepherd." (10:16)** Even before that Jesus said to Nicodemus, **"For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son."**

Jesus is simply giving this woman an opportunity to acknowledge what she trusted to be true - that God's undeserved mercy extends to all, not just to Israel. Just look at how she responded to Jesus. **"Yes, Lord. Yet their little dogs also eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." (vs. 27)** If you have dogs how often does that happen in your home? A scrap of food falls on the floor and your dog is right there to enjoy the food that was on your table.

This Gentile woman's faith saw the "Yes" that was hidden under the apparent "No". She completely understood and agreed with Jesus' words. Her place was under the table. She admitted that but it didn't prevent her from getting the "crumbs" of the blessings that Jesus could give her without depriving the "children" of anything. Jesus could answer her prayer for mercy without taking any blessings from the Jews.

Nobody deserves to have any mercy shown to them. Because of our sins we need God's mercy. Everything for forgiveness, life, and salvation depends on God being merciful. Yet those same sins also make us unworthy and undeserving of mercy. We don't even deserve any little crumbs of that mercy. Not you, not me, not this Gentile woman, not even the Jewish people whom he had dwell among. No one deserves a place at the table where God gives out the food of his mercy.

Yet God's undeserved mercy extends to all not with leftover crumbs, but the full feast at the table. Jesus came as God's instrument to show mercy to a sinful world full of sinful people like you and I to take away their sins. Jesus came through Israel to be a blessing for all people so that all could have a place at the table of God's mercy, a mercy that is ours through faith.

Let's go back to the woman's response to Jesus. What a beautiful statement of faith! She believed in him as the Lord, the promised Son of David. She trusted his mercy. She admitted her unworthiness. She accepted his word and yet she believed that he would not refuse her. Jesus commends her faith. As a result her prayer for mercy trusting Jesus was answered immediately. He didn't just drop some "crumbs" on the ground for her but he blessed her with a full meal at the table. Jesus said, **"Woman, your faith is great! It will be done for you, just as you desire."** (vs. 28)

By faith in Jesus we are given a place at the table of God's undeserved mercy and blessed as children with the full meal of his grace. Every day as we take a look at ourselves, we see our daily need for mercy. We understand that we don't deserve it at all. Yet every day we come in faith seeking God's undeserved mercy and every day our prayer for mercy is answered as forgiveness, life, and salvation are given to us all through Jesus. Every day God seats us at the table of his mercy and in the middle of that table stands the cross of Christ as the centerpiece of his table.

This woman no doubt went home rejoicing at what Jesus had just done for her. Even though she knew she really didn't seem to have a place at the table. Jesus gives her a place showing us that God's undeserved mercy indeed extends to all no matter your age, the color of your skin, or your ethnic background. All receive God's mercy the same way - through faith in Jesus. Our presence at God's table of mercy has everything to do with God and absolutely nothing to do with us. Do you have a place at the table? There indeed is a spot at that table with your name on it. Know it. Believe it. Rejoice in it every day. Amen

