

Gentiles Have a Place at the Table

Matthew 15:21-28

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St. Paul's Lutheran, North Freedom

Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly."

Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us."

He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."

The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said.

He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs."

"Yes it is, Lord," she said. "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

Then Jesus said to her, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed at that moment. (Matthew 15:21-28 NIV)

Dear friends in Jesus Christ, the Son of David, our Lord and Savior:

Who gets a place at your table for Thanksgiving dinner? You only have room for so many, so it would likely be close family and perhaps a couple of friends.

Who's on the list for a wedding banquet? Many more relatives and friends might make the list, but even there you have to draw the line somewhere. Strangers and those who aren't connected with the bridal couple would not get invited.

Who will get a place at the Lord's table and be considered part of God's family? Before Jesus, the conventional wisdom was: Only those descended from Abraham, who received the promise from God. And, more specifically, the descendants of Abraham's grandson Jacob, renamed "Israel" by God. Old Testament laws of Moses reinforced that. With rare exceptions, Gentiles, that is, non-Jews, were not allowed at the temple and were restricted to their own courtyard outside the main temple gate. It was true also of the Israelites' relatives, the Moabites and Ammonites; Moses told the Israelites: "No Ammonite or Moabite or any of their descendants may enter the assembly of the LORD, not even in the tenth generation" (Deut. 23:3). The Ammonites and Moabites had opposed Israel during their journey to the Promised Land and deserved that verdict.

So, it didn't appear that the woman who came to Jesus in our text would be accepted. First of all, she was not just a Gentile, but a "Canaanite woman." The Canaanites were descendants of Noah's grandson Canaan, who received a curse from Noah. They were pagans who worshiped false gods like Baal and acted wickedly. They lived in the land that God chose for Israel's descendants, and when the Israelites returned to the Promised Land, they were to wipe out the Canaanites and their heathen ways. But the Israelites didn't quite do that. So we have this Canaanite woman with a terrible problem: Her daughter was suffering terribly from demon-possession; an evil spirit from Satan was tormenting her child. The mother heard that Jesus was visiting near that area by Tyre and Sidon. She knew Jesus had cast demons out before. Could he do it for her child? She went as fast as she could, threw herself at Jesus' feet: "Lord, have mercy on me! Help me!"

Even after that, it didn't appear that this Gentile woman could have "a place at the table." First Jesus ignored her, not answering her a word. Even Jesus' disciples pleaded with him to do something to help and quiet her: "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us." But all Jesus did was reply to them, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." Technically that was true. Jesus' mission was not to go all over the place, but to go to Galilee and Judea and bring the gospel to the Jews, to call those lost souls back to the Lord. But he had also shared the gospel with a Samaritan woman and healed a Roman centurion's servant. What was going on?

To top it all off, when the woman persisted in asking for help, Jesus broke his silence to her by saying, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs." Now, that wasn't quite as harsh as it sounds to us. The "dogs" Jesus was speaking about weren't mongrel scavenger dogs of the street, but little pet dogs people kept in their homes. Still. Wouldn't you and I take offense at that? "I'm just a pet, not a child in your eyes? So long, Jesus; I'll take my chances with my people's gods instead of you stuck-up Jews." That's what we might expect the woman to say.

But what Jesus was doing was testing this woman's faith. She actually did have a place at the table, if she would notice the opening Jesus gave her in his remarks to her. And she saw it! "Yes," she replied. "Jesus, you're right! We Gentiles really are like pets, compared to you Israelites who are the chosen ones, the children of God! And you know what? Even we pet dogs can eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table!"

Yes, that Gentile woman did have a place at the table. And we Gentiles do too! Faith in Christ makes it that way. Notice the Gentile woman's faith right away when she called him "Lord" and "Son of David." Those were names of the Messiah, long promised to come and save his people. And this woman may have known numerous passages that promised the Gentiles would get to belong to the Lord through the Messiah, passages like the one we heard today (Isaiah 56:6,7a): "And foreigners who bind themselves to the LORD to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD and to be his servants, ... these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer."

Note also the faith of this woman when she persisted in prayer. In spite of his silence, in spite of his remarks that she could easily have taken the wrong way, the woman kept after him: "Lord, have mercy on me! Lord, save me!" She wouldn't let go. That's what faith is: Just clinging to Jesus. That's what led Jesus to remark: "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And right away, her daughter was healed, the demon cast out. What joy and relief!

Great faith receives great blessings. It's not because we're so great; like the woman, we have to confess humbly that we are nothing more than dogs, unworthy of God's love because of our sins. But we simply hold on to his promises in his Word, that he will forgive us and has the power to cast Satan out of our lives; that he does save us and that he does take our sins away. Great faith is great when it trusts a great person. And Jesus is our great Savior. That's why we cling to him, for our Lord Jesus clings to us and won't let go.

Fellow Gentiles, you and I by the grace of God have a place at the table. When he tests you, when it seems like our prayers are falling on deaf ears, when we hear his Word that we might take the wrong way, don't give up. Don't let go. Just persist in faith in your Lord Jesus. And you will be greatly blessed, by his grace. Amen.