

Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship  
Anita Rediger  
September 6, 2009

“Even the Crumbs!”

A story from my summer travels to Greece

The opportunity for travel to Greece this summer came very unexpectedly. My friend, George McClain, had called to visit one evening in May – and was telling me that he had just purchased a ticket to fly to Athens. He would be meeting a New Testament professor colleague who would be in Greece in June. Suddenly, I found myself saying... “Can I come, too?” Well, by the end of the next week, I was purchasing a ticket to Athens! Several times – after that – I thought to myself, “I must really want to go, because I’m not wondering much about

1. lodging
2. language
3. **and... the “biggie” - how the three of us are going to “get along” with one another!!!**

These are usually some of the things I “dread” when I think of travel – especially when I think that I might not have “my” space! (what about sharing bathrooms and bedrooms?? YIKES) Now, I’ve known George for at least 10 years, but I’ve certainly never traveled with him and I had never seen Reta before! ( This makes me wonder what they were thinking about me!) However, it was a good thing that I didn’t waste energy worrying about how we were going to “mesh”...because we got along “famously!” That is, we got along fine, until one evening when George and I had an encounter in the kitchen!

Let me tell you “my side” of the story! We had enjoyed another one of our delightful evening meals in the kitchen of our apartment – crusty bread, Greek yogurt, melon... sliced ham and chocolate cake (and wonderful conversation). I was washing dishes and George was cleaning off the table, putting things away. I turned – dish cloth in hand – ready to wipe off the table and what did I see??? George - he certainly was cleaning off the table...I thought that he was sweeping together the crumbs to put in the wastebasket when with one broad stroke of the hand he – I tell you with a flair – brushed the crumbs off the table ONTO the floor! I couldn’t believe my eyes...the crumbs from the bread and the cake – brushed onto the floor...and on purpose, no less! Well, that was it – I said, “George McClain – that’s it...we’ve gotten along just great until now, but that is unforgivable! It’s over!!!”

George said, “Oh, I always do that at home...the dog likes to lick up the crumbs.” In my horrified state, I collected myself enough to point out to him that WE were in Athens – not on Staten Island - and that we didn’t have a dog! Well, as you can imagine, we

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laughed and laughed about this...that is after I got out the broom and swept up those crumbs!

### Jesus and the Syrophenician woman

The story of Jesus and the Syrophenician woman found in our Gospel text for this morning also is also a story centered around crumbs. (re-reading of Mark 7:24-30)

First, let's step back from this story to see what has been happening up to this point in the Gospel of Mark. In the first chapters of Mark we see Jesus proclaiming the kingdom – in all kinds of ways, to all kinds of people. We read of Jesus crisscrossing the Sea of Galilee, bringing healing and hope to Jewish and gentile peoples alike. The Gospel of Mark doesn't simply **tell** us about the coming of the Kingdom; it **shows** us that the Kingdom is at hand – the blind are made to see, the lame walk and the deaf hear...and it doesn't matter to Jesus “who you are” or “where you come from!”

This is important background for the pericope of this morning. If we were to read the story of this encounter between Jesus and the gentile woman “all by itself” I believe that we miss the heart of its message and its very important place in the Gospel. With thoughts of Jesus' prior healing and blessing in mind, let's return to this morning's story:

Jesus has come to the region of Tyre – in the province of Syria. It seems that he's hoping to travel *inognito* - perhaps for needed respite and space. “Yet, (I love this line) he could not escape notice.” Think of it, Jesus cannot escape notice! – no matter what - he draws a crowd – either a crowd of those who seek him out for healing or, as we noted last week, a crowd which seeks to challenge him. (As in that day, I believe that the spirit of Jesus, still “cannot escape notice!”) Anyway, a woman has noticed Jesus - a woman, a Gentile, a Gentile woman of Syrophenician origin. That is - a woman of the most despicable origins...a really base Gentile! Now, if that's not a tautology!

Yet strangely, isn't her story is vaguely familiar to us. (Mark 5:21-24) She's a parent with a sick daughter – She comes in the very same posture as the esteemed synagogue leader, Jarius of chapter 5 – also a parent of a sick daughter. She bows at Jesus' feet begging, just as Jarius had, for the healing of her daughter. But now, in the midst of many other wonderful accounts of healing – Jesus seems to balk. What? Why would Jesus resist this woman? Jesus has already been out and about healing Gentile people, why would he suddenly give this woman a hard time about her identity?

Let's look. I don't think that Jesus was giving this woman a hard time about her identity or that he didn't feel it “appropriate” to care for Gentile children. I believe that the writer

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of the Gospel includes this exchange between Jesus and the Syrophenician woman for a very different reason.

1. The woman engages Jesus first off – Jesus didn't approach her; she approached him. So far, Jesus is "victim" of her advances. But now, Jesus has a choice. He could ignore the woman – a woman with which he really should have nothing to do with – that is if he's to keep the Pharisees and scribes happy. He could protect himself – by distancing himself from her and pretending that she didn't exist he could protect himself from ritual impurity.
2. However, we see that Jesus **does** make the choice to acknowledge the woman. He makes the choice to enter into dialogue with this woman – what must this mean to her! Have you have ever been ignored simply because of who or what you are? If you have been, then you know how powerful this gift of acknowledgement can be.
3. Not, only does Jesus acknowledge the woman, he invites her response by listening to her. It's not just a one-way conversation. And believe it or not... they begin a theological conversation much like a conversation that Jesus would have had with his peers – the Jewish men – over aspects and understandings of Torah. When we read accounts of Jesus and the Pharisees discussing/ challenging one another we cringe – yet this was what Jewish men did – sharpening and honing one another's skills at discourse and debate. Always attempting to "have the last word."
4. And now...the account does the truly unthinkable...it records for all to see that Jesus concedes defeat to this woman's argument. She says that even the little dogs' little crumbs are enough for her – its enough – it's the Kingdom – like a mustard seed, like the seed scattered by the sower...it's enough and Jesus publicly concedes that this woman has bested him. Jesus acknowledges the brightness of her words and he blesses her as she leaves for home. At home a well daughter awaits her. In the Kingdom- even crumbs are enough!

This story is plopped down in the midst of Jesus' otherwise no questions-asked healings. Look to the next story...another sick person, another sick Gentile person...Jesus heals the man without inquiring about his pedigree. *The story of the Syrophenician woman is told in great detail to point out Jesus' radical openness to all who have been relegated to the fringes of society, rendered invisible and in-valid by their very personhood.* In the kingdom of God, Jesus demonstrates, it's not that way! It's really not that way...even the "outer-est" of outsiders belong!

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The Gospel writer slows down Mark's urgent narrative so that those listening don't miss out on this vital kingdom message. In the Kingdom of God, ...even the most unlikely folks belong! Believe it or not – even people like us – our true-to-self-honest-selves-belong. No matter how we've been classified or categorized – we belong! And then, because of our true interactions with Jesus, as a result of his open reception to us - a strange thing happens. *Our encounter with Jesus...leads to the healing of those around us.*

With a broad sweep of his hands, I see Jesus laughing and brushing a table-full of crumbs to the floor... The woman laughs, too, and goes home...May we go now, as did that persistent woman – a gentile woman of Syrophoenician origins, no less, living in the delight of membership in the Kingdom. And...let's see what happens at home!