

20th Sunday of the Ordinary Time

*At that time, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon.
And behold, a Canaanite woman of that district came and called out,
"Have pity on me, Lord, Son of David!
My daughter is tormented by a demon."
But Jesus did not say a word in answer to her.
Jesus' disciples came and asked him,
"Send her away, for she keeps calling out after us."
He said in reply,
"I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."
But the woman came and did Jesus homage, saying, "Lord, help me."
He said in reply,
"It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs."
She said, "Please, Lord, for even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of their masters."
Then Jesus said to her in reply,
"O woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish."
And the woman's daughter was healed from that hour. (Mt 15: 21-28)*

You don't need to know the whole dramatic history between the Jews and the Canaanites to feel tension in the Gospel today. The woman is annoyingly persistent, and Jesus is surprisingly indifferent. As polite spectators, we are reading, line by line, the increasing tension as this scene develops. We are surprised by the way Jesus treats the woman, although we presume that he must have a reason. She obviously cares for her daughter. Unfortunately she is not a Jew. Being good Christians, we are slightly taken aback by the final argument Jesus uses: "It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs." It's true she doesn't belong and she is a confused outsider yet "dogs" might be a little too much. Just as we are ready to point this out to Jesus, we hear unexpected revelation: "O woman, great is your faith!" It hits with a double force. First, because we realize that the whole purpose of conversation with her was to show us who she is, and his responses were just mirrors, unveiling our attitudes. Secondly, and most importantly, we discover that the dogs that cannot appreciate the precious food of the children could be ourselves.

"My daughter is tormented by a demon." She didn't come with that request to a medicine man or a magician. When demons are in play, there is nowhere else to go but to God himself. Her suffering gives her astounding clarity. "Have pity on me, Son of David." What I suddenly realized is how much God's sight is different than mine. He saw her faith from the beginning. Meanwhile, I was seeing her as somebody not deserving of God's love. I expected her to meet some expectations first - she must join the club, she must fit the approved narrative of my life, and she must become more like me before she meets God.

Here comes the moment of shame. Is it possible that when Jesus refers to a "dog on whom the food of the children is wasted," he refers to people like me? Always self-congratulatory about their faith, always happy about themselves, even in the middle of sin? People who don't need God's mercy, don't need healing? Why would I look for the Messiah if I am happy at home? Why would I look for healing if I am convinced that over all, I'm doing okay? Thank you very

much. If I have any religious needs, I will respond to them proportionally. There's no need to panic. Right now, there are other priorities. Maybe later. Let's not be crazy.

"Lord, for even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of their masters." This foreign woman unexpectedly becomes my guide back to Jesus. The scraps from the table of my Master. First, the Master. Yes, he is the Master, not a consultant, not an advisor, not a life-coach or a therapist. The Master and a teacher whom I must trust more than I do myself.

Second, the scraps. What are they? The Fathers of the Church called them *semina Dei* - seeds of God: those little pieces of holiness that are constantly offered to me and that really feed me for eternal life, if only I have the humility to see them. They surround me from every direction, disguised as examples of beauty, as moments of faithfulness, as friends and strangers who for some reason care about me, and most of all as the sacramental moments of His Presence, even when they are filtered by my blindness, stupidity, or sin. They are places and moments of holiness in my rather unholy life. They teach me, they feed me, they trace the road to the Master. The way I arrange my house for prayer, the way I speak or read God's Word, the way I treat strangers on the streets, the way I think and speak to my family, unexpected gifts offered freely and joyfully. All of these, and millions of others, can become the seeds of God.

I must protect these seeds of God. I must collect them and learn to live by them. I must allow them to grow and transform me. Above all, I must treasure them. As long as it takes, as completely as I am capable, until I can say with the Canaanite woman, "Have pity on me, Lord, Son of David!"