

Proper 18B
Mark 7:24-37, James 2

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The 3-Legged Table

²⁴From there Jesus set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, ²⁵but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. ²⁶Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." ²⁸But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." ²⁹Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go — the demon has left your daughter." ³⁰So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone. (Mark 7:24-30)

¹⁴What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? ¹⁵If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, ¹⁶and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? ¹⁷So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. (James 2:14-17)

I wish we knew the name of the woman who debates theology with Jesus while seeking help for her daughter. It doesn't seem right to just call her "that Gentile woman" or "the Syrophoenician woman". Those descriptions are given to highlight that she was not a descendant of Abraham and did not live according to the law of Moses. She was an outsider, someone not included in the promises made to Abraham and Moses. But I wish we knew her name because she did something for which she deserves to be remembered in the same breath as Abraham and Moses.

In Genesis 18, Abraham gets in a debate with the LORD God about the punishment that is going to befall Sodom. Abraham notes that not all the residents of Sodom are wicked and questions whether it is just for the righteous to be punished because of the sins of others. Abraham and God engage in a fascinating debate in which Abraham gets God to agree that the presence of fifty righteous people should save the city, then forty-five, then forty, then thirty, and finally, Abraham prods, if ten righteous people are present, is it not just to save the city for the sake of the ten? And the LORD God relents and says, "You're right, Abraham. It is not just that the righteous suffer for the sins of the wicked."

In Exodus 32, it is Moses who debates with the LORD God. While Moses was up on Mt. Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments, the Israelites got tired of waiting and built a Golden Calf to worship. The LORD God's anger burned hot and God is ready to destroy this unfaithful people, but Moses argues, "LORD, what are the Egyptians going to think if you go to all the work of bringing your people out of bondage, only to destroy them in the wilderness? You made promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Israel. Do you want to be known as a God who does not keep his promises?" And the LORD God relents and says, "You're right, Moses. I did make those promises and I will keep them." And the text says, "And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people."

Abraham and Moses argue theology with God and they win the argument. That's pretty impressive. And now, joining this elite group, is an unnamed Gentile woman who is not a descendant of Abraham and does not follow the laws of Moses, someone who has no standing to appeal to the promises of God. She comes to Jesus as a mother, pleading for help for her daughter. She has heard that Jesus has the power to heal people and make them whole. That's what she wants for her daughter. Jesus' reply is rather sharp, "It is not fair to take the children's food (the children being the descendants of Abraham, the food being the blessings of God) and throw it to the dogs (dogs being the mongrels, scavengers, that are not part of the family).

This sounds kind of out of character for Jesus, who we know in every other instance shows compassion for those who are hurting or marginalized by the community. He's basically saying, "Look, lady, I'm tired. I've come up here to get some rest. You are not part of the people to whom I was sent. There is not a place for you at my table. You are not my responsibility."

This desperate mother is not about to be brushed off so easily. Just like Abraham and Moses had challenged God to rethink God's plans, she challenges Jesus to rethink the scope of his ministry. She does not deny that she is a "dog", someone who stands outside the promises God made to the people of Israel, but she observes that even dogs receive a blessing when they are near the table, picking up the crumbs that fall to the ground. If a dog can receive an undeserved blessing from the master's table, might her daughter not be able to receive an undeserved blessing from Jesus and be made whole?

The determined mother shows a lot of pluck. We might even call it chutzpa. Who is she to argue theology with Jesus!

The text doesn't indicate how much time passes before Jesus makes his response. It simply says, "Then he said to her..." In my mind's eye, I don't think Jesus gives an immediate response. I think he thinks a spell. Could she be right? Might my role as messiah be more encompassing than I originally thought? Wasn't part of the promise God made to Abraham that through his descendants all nations of the earth will be blessed? If I am to truly love my neighbor as I love myself, doesn't that include this Gentile woman and her daughter? Is it possible that I am to be messiah not only of the people of Israel, but of the Gentiles as well?

Jesus gives his answer: "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." The young mother has made her case well. She and her daughter do belong at the table. They are part of Jesus' community. They are welcome to eat at Jesus' feast.

It is the image of the table that caught my eye as I studied this story this past week. Maybe it's because of the "table talks" we had here on Thursday evening. Maybe it's because of the all the tables we set up for our lunch today. A table is a rich, multi-layered image. It implies community and belonging. It is an image of the kingdom of God where all have a place at the table. It calls to mind the table we gather around each week to receive bread and wine, the presence of Christ.

I got another image of the table when I typed the Prayer of the Day into today's bulletin. The second sentence jumped out at me. "Open us to the opportunities for ministry that lie before us, where faith and works and the need of our neighbor come together in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior."

Faith, works, and the need of our neighbor – three components are necessary for Jesus’ table, his way of discipleship. First and foremost is faith – knowing the promises of God and placing our trust in those promises – promises God made to Abraham and his family, promises Jesus made to his disciples and the church, promises God makes to each of us personally in our baptism. That is the first leg of the table – God’s promises and our trust in those promises.

But we hear in the reading from James that faith is not enough. Faith without works is dead faith, says James. Faith is not a private possession, but a gift given to enrich the community. Just as a healthy apple tree can be expected to bear apples and a healthy cherry tree can be expected to bear cherries, a healthy disciple of Jesus can be expected to bear the fruit of good works. That is the second leg of the table – good works.

But which good works? Are all disciples of Jesus expected to do the same thing? The answer to that is “no”. There is no book we can look at where we can turn the page to September 10 and find out what good works are on the schedule for today. The works we are called on to do are determined by the need of our neighbor. If a neighbor is hungry, we are to feed them. If a neighbor is lonely, we are to visit them. If a neighbor is grieving, we are to walk with them and support them. What if there are many people who are hungry or homeless or oppressed, more that we can personally attend to? In that situation, the good work disciples of Jesus are called to do is to work for justice, for justice is the form love takes when there is more than one neighbor to be served. Identifying the need of our neighbor to give direction to our good works is the third leg of the table.

Now you know that a table with only one leg is not going to be of any practical use. And a table with two legs will be unstable and fall over. But given three legs, a table will have stability and provide a sturdy gathering place for a community, whether it’s a family, a congregation, or an entire society.

Listen to that prayer again: “Open us to the opportunities for ministry that lie before us, where faith and works and the need of our neighbor come together in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior.” When Jesus heard the mother’s plea to be included at the table, I think he reflected on the promises God had made to Abraham (his faith), the expectations of the law to love one’s neighbor (good works), and this woman’s plea to heal her daughter (her need). He put them all together and came to the conclusion that she was right – there is a place for her and her daughter at his table, in the kingdom of God. That’s why we can confidently sing of and strive for this vision of the kingdom of God – “For everyone born, there’s a place at the table.”