

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time

One of my favorite things to eat is bread – banana bread, Irish soda bread, pita bread, tortillas, funnel cakes – I like it all. Too bad too much of a good thing is not a good thing! And, it seems that bread is one of the favorite foods in the Bible too, as it's mentioned so often. In fact, in today's Gospel, a deep theological conversation unfolds between Jesus and a Canaanite woman over the issue of bread.

As we just heard, this mother, whose daughter was tormented by a demon, cried out for Jesus to have pity on her. You can probably imagine the frustration, the fear, and the great sense of urgency this mother felt. And yet, even after a second humble plea, Jesus only responds with the words, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Wow. Maybe the first time you heard that, you thought: "How insensitive! Why would Jesus say such a thing?" Well, because it was true. In fact, Jesus, as the Messiah of Israel, was sent to the Jewish people only, who for centuries had been awaiting Him. It was the Israelites, then, who were to accept Him, and then be a light to all the nations as evangelizers. But as we know, the Israelites largely rejected the Messiah.

But still, even though this was the way things were, doesn't it still seem quite inflammatory to say to a person whose child is in great need: "It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs"? Ouch.

And if we only stayed on this surface, linguistic level, we might keep scratching our heads as to what's really going on here. But when we dig a little deeper, and turn to the language the New Testament, which is Greek, we find the context of what the Lord really means here. In fact, just as in English, we have several words for 'dog' – like mutt, hound, puppy – so too in Greek. Now when Jesus said it is not right to take the food – and the Greek word is actually “bread” – and give it to the dogs, He's not using the word for wild dogs that run in the street, nor the slang way which speaks negatively of scoundrels – “those dogs”. But rather, he's using a term, which might best be rendered as “lap dog” – as a household pet.

And this Canaanite woman obviously understood this nuance. Jesus referred to her people, the Gentiles, as lap dogs – as household pets. And so her reply of, “Please, Lord, for even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of their masters”, might be translated as follows: “Did you say it would be wrong to take bread away from the children and feed it to the dogs? You said these dogs were household pets. They don't run wild in the street; they sit at the feet of their master. And if their master is at the dinner table, they're under the table, at his feet. It's to be expected that crumbs of bread will fall to the floor, and that the household dog will eat them. It might even be that the master of the house would throw the dog some of the leftovers. So, if I'm your beloved pet looking up at you, then simply grant me a scrap of bread. That's all I'm asking of you.”

Wow! Obviously this woman got it. Obviously, she knew her place. But obviously she had great faith, which Jesus praised and blessed, and then granted her request and healed her daughter.

You know, maybe sometimes we feel like the Lord deals harshly with us. Maybe we feel like the dog kicked to the curb, and not the puppy cuddled and petted. Perhaps we ask the Lord for something in prayer, but He doesn't give us what we want, or He doesn't answer us in the way we request. Maybe we look at other families or friends going through so much and wonder, "Why would God allow this?" Perhaps we feel like all we get is scraps from God.

But today Jesus shows us that even the scraps, even the crumbs, even that little bit of bread goes a long way. Real faith – no matter how little it feels or seems – pushes past the reality at hand and hopes for more – believes in more. This faith is precious in the sight of the Lord. God readily receives our faith. He takes it, and He blesses it, and He multiplies His graces within us, and restores to us what we thought the locusts had already devoured.

And so today, as we come to the altar to receive the bread become the Body of Christ, we receive those holy crumbs, asking God to increase our faith – to give us the faith of that Canaanite woman, who was not afraid to ask in faith for what she truly needed. And God, in His wisdom and love, will answer us with the good gifts that we, His children, most truly need. God bless you.