

What is it about food that brings people together? Last weekend the daughter of one of our elders invited five couples to a special dinner. She has a passion for farm-to-table cooking and food, and she just wanted to bless all of us with a special meal. From start to finish it was amazing.

- There was an appetizer of Romesco sauce with roasted cipollini onions, carrots, potatoes and cauliflower
- A citrusy spring salad with feta, hazelnuts, pea sprouts and homegrown micro-greens
- A main course of roasted broccoli rabe in caper vinaigrette, chicken Marbella over whole grain couscous, and olive whole wheat sourdough made from scratch
- We finished it off with Meyer lemon goat cheese pistachio cheesecakes with fresh local blackberries

I couldn't pronounce most of what I ate but it was delicious, and it nourished our fellowship as couples who have shared life and ministry together for many years.

That shouldn't surprise us. Have you noticed in the Bible when God wants to bring his people together and show his love, he often does so with food? Eden was filled with fruit. The Promised Land held milk and honey. In the wilderness, God rained down quail and manna. The Lord's Supper is a meal of bread and wine. And at the end of all history, there will be a great banquet called *"the wedding supper of the lamb."* Rev 19:9 says, *"Blessed are those who are invited."*

In Jesus' day, God's people longed to be invited to this feast and sit with the Messiah at the banquet table. Our text today in Matthew's gospel is a foretaste of that. It's kind of ironic this text comes right after a confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees, which was all about food and what makes a person clean and unclean. Jesus told them it wasn't what goes into your mouth that defiles you but what comes out because that comes from your heart. That idea was unheard of to the Pharisees, but what Jesus went on to do was even more unheard of.

In this passage before us, we have two stories that really answer two questions: First, who is invited to the master's table? Second, how does one get into the banquet?

**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.

Jesus left there and went along the Sea of Galilee. Then he went up on a mountainside and sat down. Great crowds came to him, bringing the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute and many others, and laid them at his feet; and he healed them. The people were amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled made well, the lame walking and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel.

Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry, or they may collapse on the way."

His disciples answered, "Where could we get enough bread in this remote place to feed such a crowd?"

"How many loaves do you have?" Jesus asked.

"Seven," they replied, "and a few small fish."

He told the crowd to sit down on the ground. Then he took the seven loaves and the fish, and when he had given thanks, he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and they in turn to the people. They all ate and were satisfied. Afterward the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. The number of those who ate was four thousand men, besides women and children. After Jesus had sent the crowd away, he got into the boat and went to the vicinity of Magadan.

### **Who's Invited to the Master's Table?**

The first question, who's invited to the master's table? This question has a simple answer—everyone is invited. In other words, it's an open invitation.

In Jesus' day, the Jews considered themselves insiders and everyone else was an outsider. Matthew shows Jesus moving outside of those defined boundaries, which is kind of strange because Matthew is the most Jewish of all the gospels. However, it's also the most inclusive of Gentiles as well.

We see this in a number of ways in this text. Jesus left Galilee and traveled north to Tyre and Sidon. Tyre is about 35 miles north of Gennesaret where Jesus had been, and Sidon is about 25 miles beyond that. You can imagine how making that journey by foot would have taken awhile—weeks or even months. By the way, this is the only time in Jesus' ministry he traveled inside Gentile lands. Why walk all the way there? Why leave the Promised Land for pagan land? On top of it all, the people of Tyre were ancient enemies of Israel. The Jewish historian Josephus, who wrote roughly in the time of Christ, said, "The people of Tyre are our bitterest enemies." To put it bluntly, the Jews hated these people. Yet this is the region Jesus intentionally visits.

So that's v. 21—Jesus' journey to Gentileville. Look at v. 22. Who did he meet?—A Canaanite woman. That describes both her race and her religion. If you've read the Old Testament you know the Canaanites were the bad guys; Israel's arch enemies. Not only that, she's a woman. Jewish men weren't to associate with women who were not their wife or mother, especially Gentile women. I have no doubt when Jesus seems to ignore her, the disciples are thinking, "Right on, Jesus!" They're not surprised Jesus ignores this Canaanite woman; they applaud it, because no rabbi should.

And then later, Jesus leaves this region and goes somewhere "along the Sea of Galilee." He begins to heal people. Who were these people? They were Gentiles. How do I know that? For a few reasons: First, in Mark's gospel he says all this took place "*in the region of the Decapolis*," which was ten cities filled with Gentiles. Second, at the end of v. 31, it says after seeing Jesus heal many people, they "*praised the God of Israel*." When it says, "*the God of Israel*" that's a way of speaking, which Gentiles rather than Jews would use.

Then we come to the feeding of the 4,000. You might think this is déjà vu all over again. I mean it was just back in chapter 14 we read of the feeding of the 5,000. Why another feeding story? For centuries scholars have believed the feeding of the 5,000 was Jesus' provision for the Jews, and the feeding of the 4,000 was his provision for the Gentiles. Remember twelve baskets were leftover in the first feeding. That number represents Israel; think the twelve tribes. But in the feeding of the 4,000, there were just seven leftover baskets filled. The number seven signifies perfection or completeness as in the seven days of creation. Here, seven points to the completion or the fullness of Christ's mission throughout the world to every tongue, tribe, and nation. All of this points to the fact that Jesus is radically inclusive.

In every human culture and group, there's a powerful urge to include some people and exclude others. C.S. Lewis called this the lure of the "inner ring." We exclude people because they don't meet our standards of beauty, intelligence, racial purity, family background or even religious practice. However, if we're going to be like Jesus, we have to intentionally move out of our inner ring;

we have to look for people on the margins. Like him, we may have to walk a long way to do it. We may have to cross over into places where people are different and even threatening to us.

So we answered the first question—who's invited to the master's table? Answer: everyone—Jews and Gentiles. Paul put it this way in Galatians 3:28, "*There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*"

### **How Does One Get Invited Into the Banquet?**

The second question is how do you get into this banquet? We all get invited, but what's the ticket in? The answer is faith. Who's invited—Everyone. The Kingdom is inclusive. How do you get in? Only by faith. The Kingdom is also exclusive because it's only by faith we get in.

And what do we learn about faith in this passage? Look more carefully at this Canaanite woman because Jesus said she has "*great faith*." Jesus said in the last chapter the disciples had "little faith." That's better than no faith, but what's so great about this woman's faith?

#### **Her faith was in Jesus**

The most important thing is to recognize the object of her faith, and that is Jesus. We don't place our faith in faith. It's about Jesus. It's not about having confidence in ourselves, but confidence in him. This Canaanite woman gets who Jesus is. She calls him the "Son of David," which is a way of saying he's the King, the Messiah. Somehow this Gentile woman got that. Not only that but also three times she calls him "Lord." He proves he's the Lord because only the Lord would have the authority to deliver her daughter, and only the Lord could multiply seven loaves and a few small fish to feed so many people. Don't put your faith in faith. Put your faith in him! Get to know him better. Don't just know about him. Know him!

#### **Her faith was persistent**

Not only was her faith in the right person, but her faith was persistent. She came to Jesus and cried out for help, but he seemed to ignore her. Apparently, she didn't stop because finally the disciples came and begged him to send her away because she just would not shut up! But she kept on asking and even knelt before him.

This story has puzzled many people because Jesus seems so harsh and cold with her. I've heard it said the opposite of love isn't hatred but indifference, and Jesus seems indifferent in this story. But we know Jesus better than that. I believe Jesus had a strategy with her. He wanted to test and ultimately show off her faith. Listen to what the great preacher Charles Spurgeon said about her, "The Lord Jesus was charmed with the fair jewel of this woman's faith and watching it and delighting in it, He resolved to turn it round and set it in other lights, that the various facets of this priceless diamond might, each one, flash its brilliance and delight His soul!"

And what shines the brightest about her faith is her persistence. She keeps begging him, even when he says, ***“I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.”*** Again, I’m sure the disciples were thinking, right on, Jesus! But what’s going on here? I thought we were talking about inclusivity! This sounds awfully exclusive! But God has always had a PLAN of salvation. He loves and desires to save the world—every person and every ethnic group. His plan was to begin with one family and one nation and through them to bless the whole world. Jesus’ ministry was primarily to Jews, however, at the end of this gospel; he sends his disciples out to all the nations. Even the apostle Paul observed this order when he wrote in Romans, ***“I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek”*** (Rom. 1:16). In the book of Acts, the Apostles followed this plan as well. When they came into a city, they went first to the synagogue and then later to the Gentiles.

And the amazing thing about this woman is she “gets it” when his disciples don’t! We see it even more in the next interchange. She knelt before him and cried out, ***“Lord, help me.”*** Jesus responded, ***“It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.”*** I don’t want to soften what Jesus said. Any way we look at it, this was hard to hear. A person of lesser faith would have been put off. But honestly, I think Jesus said it with a twinkle in his eye. There was a sign of hope in the word Jesus used for “dogs.” There are two words for “dogs” he could have used. One of the words referred to wild, mangy, ravenous street dogs you’d never allow into your house. Jesus does NOT use that word here. The other word refers to a household dog that’s almost part of the family, like my dog, Daisy. Daisy has taken this thing one step further; she’s not a part of the family, she runs the family! But that’s the word Jesus used here.

Look at her reply, ***“Yes it is, Lord,” she said. “Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.”*** Do you see what I mean when I say she “gets it?” She understood exactly what Jesus was saying, “Yes, I get it, Lord. ‘To the Jew first,’ but there should be a few crumbs for us Gentiles, right? That’s was the plan from the start, right?” I detect an element of playfulness about her like she was sparring with Jesus. She had a little attitude going: “All right, Lord. Go ahead, by all means, feed the kids. But I’ll bet you have a crumb for even me.” And what we know now is we Gentiles would get more than a few crumbs falling from the table; we’d get to sit at the table and be part of the feast!

This woman had both insight and incredible persistence. She got the plan of God, and she wouldn’t be put off. I wonder if you’ve ever felt the silent rebuff of Jesus? Have you ever felt like he’s putting you off? You’ve prayed and prayed—to no avail. How do you handle a God who chooses not to speak in your emergencies, when you’re in the crucible of your tribulation, and he answers you not a word and seems to be ignoring you? How do you worship a Christ like that? What do you do? Do you stop? Sometimes

we pray for the wrong things, and we need to reevaluate what we’re praying for but, more often than not, Jesus wants us to persist. He wants “to hold up the fair jewel of our faith.” There’s a hungry, desperate side of faith that’s relentless in its pursuit of God’s blessing. Like Jacob wrestling with the angel of the Lord all night long, refusing to let go until he was blessed. Don’t give up. Keep wrestling; keep praying. God wants us to be people who’ll endure, wrestle and persevere and refuse to quit; people like the woman who kept banging on the door of the unjust judge and would not give up; people like the neighbor who kept pounding on the door of another, confident that eventually there would be an answer.

### **Her faith appealed to God’s mercy**

There’s something else this woman teaches us about faith. She appealed to Jesus solely on the basis of his mercy. She cried out, “Have mercy on me!” And the fact that she doesn’t argue about him calling her a gentile dog is even stronger proof of her awareness she has no claim to him or his blessings. She doesn’t argue the point or bristle over the implied insult. She recognized she had no merit, no priority, no standing, nothing to commend her. Her attitude was the opposite of the common “you owe me” attitude of so many today. She didn’t argue her case as an exception or lobby for special treatment. She accepted his judgment and bowed down as a beggar for grace.

When Harry Truman was thrust into the Presidency by the death of FDR, a friend of his took him aside and said, “Harry, from here on out, you’re going to have lots of people around you. They will try to put up a wall around you and cut you off from any ideas but their own. They will tell you what a great man you are, Harry, but both you and I know you ain’t.” I don’t know how Harry Truman took that, but a man of faith would take it to heart. Some of you are successful like Harry Truman. You have a lot of people telling you how great you are. Don’t believe it. You are what you are by the grace of God!

True faith doesn’t come to God with bargaining chips. It comes to God as a beggar, empty-handed, desperately crying out for mercy. Faith doesn’t believe deep down we’re worthy of God’s grace and help. Let me put it this way; unless we’re willing to receive God’s insult, we’ll never be in a position to receive his mercy and grace. The insult is there’s nothing in us worthy of his love. He’s under no obligation to give anything to us. There’s one thing we deserve, and that’s judgment. When we come to accept that, then and only then, are we in a position to receive his grace.

### **Her faith trusted in the goodness of God**

But that’s not all we learn from this woman about faith. Though she appealed solely on the basis of mercy, she didn’t cut herself off from God’s grace by believing that she was too unworthy to receive anything at all. Her faith showed a relentless trust in the goodness of God. I mean she even found some consolation in

being called a dog! She picked up what he said, as a good dog picks up her master's stick, and brings it right back to his feet. She said, "Lord, I'll accept your verdict that I'm a household dog, but even dogs look to their Master for food, and your abundant goodness to your children is so rich there have to be a few crumbs falling from the table for me." It's not that she believes she deserves the crumbs, it's just that she believes God's grace is such that there must be some for even one such as she.

The hardest thing about believing like that is deep down most of us carry around a lot of shame. Maybe you saw the movie, which came out years ago with Sean Penn and Susan Sarandon, called *Dead Man Walking*. It's a true story about the relationship between a convicted rapist and murderer on death row and a Nun who becomes his spiritual director during the final days of his life. The man is hard and calloused. His hatred for self and for others is deep. But this woman showed him the relentless love of Christ. Her main objective in the final days of his life was to get him to take responsibility for his sin, which he did. Once he did that, the next thing was to get him to do was believe God loved him. That was even harder to do.

Just before he went into the room to be executed, she told him she'd be watching as he died and she told him to keep his eyes on her the whole time because she wanted the last thing he saw to be the face of love. And he did that. In the last scene, as he's splayed out as if on a cross, with tears streaming down his face, he watches the face of love as he closes his eyes for the last time.

The challenge for many of us is to keep our eyes on that face of love despite our sin and our shame. We don't deserve even a crumb from God's table, but his goodness, grace, and love are so lavish, he spreads a banquet before us. Do you believe that?

What was the result of this woman's faith? ***"Then Jesus said to her, 'Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.' And her daughter was healed at that moment."*** That word "great" comes from a form of the Greek word mega. We talk about megavitamins or mega churches. She had mega faith. The King of Kings honored this woman, who everybody thought was the spiritual bottom of the barrel. Jesus saw great faith in her and sent her off with the promise her daughter was healed, and she WAS at that very moment.

One of my favorite things to do when my kids were young was to go into their room at night when they were sound asleep, kneel beside their bed, pray for them, kiss them, and make sure the covers were over them. It was always amazing to see how still they were in their beds at night. This woman may have never

seen her daughter like that. But on this night I'll bet she knelt beside her bed and watched the stillness in her daughter's soul. I'll bet she laid her hands on her and thanked the Lord for more than a crumb of grace, which had fallen from the table.

*First question:* Who gets invited to the Master's table?

*Answer*—everyone. What do we do with that? Let me suggest one thing: take a long walk. I mean go someplace outside of your normal boundaries. Go to Tyre and Sidon. If you do that, you very well might find faith in the most unlikely places. But are we looking? Are we moving beyond our comfort zones? This has always been a hallmark of this church. It's one of our Core Values. We want to be a place where lost, hurting and broken people are found, welcomed and transformed. We don't want to be a place where everyone has to be put together. That's why over 25 years ago a group of CPC's walked into the recovery community and started a ministry called Higher Power. That's why we have men and women walking with homeless Vets, walking to hotels in the Tenderloin, and walking to the homeless in RWC. I love how, right now, we have a team of CPC'ers in Greece building a playground for Syrian refugees. They're going to meet some desperate people like the woman we met today.

*Second question:* How does one actually get into the banquet?

*Answer*—by faith in Christ alone. What do we do with that? Let me suggest one more thing: evaluate your own faith. Is your faith in faith or is your faith in Jesus? Do you know him as your Lord, as the Son of David (promised Messiah-King)? Do you know him as the only one who can heal your fatal disease of sin? And how is the Lord growing your faith? How is he developing persistence, humility, and trust in his goodness? Does it feel like he's putting you off? Keep coming to him. Appeal not to your own goodness, but to HIS goodness and mercy.

Today we're celebrating what we call communion or the Lord's Supper. The words we read as Jesus fed the 4,000 are very significant—the bread was taken, it was blessed, it was broken, and it was given. This looks forward to Jesus as the bread of life who also was taken, blessed, broken and given. This meal looks forward to another meal at the end of the time—the wedding feast of the Lamb. And, today, as we eat, we take the bread, bless it, break it, and give it. And who's invited to this meal?—Everyone. And how do we get into this feast—Faith in Jesus.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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