

Sunday, August 14, 2011
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – St. Mary’s Roman Catholic Church - "Crumbs from the Table"

I want to thank Father Joe for inviting me to join you today.

I bring you greetings of grace and peace from your neighbors at the Congregational Church in Salisbury.

Today’s gospel reading is perhaps one of the most interesting stories we have about Jesus and his ministry.

The early part of this chapter includes several accounts of miracles: the feeding of 5,000; Jesus and Peter walking on water;

healing all the people who touched the hem of his cloak in Gennesaret.

In each of the previous passages, there is no distinction made of followers being Israelites or Gentiles.

In the passage immediately preceding this one Jesus has admonished the Pharisees for being hypocritical and proclaimed that what is important is what comes out of our hearts – not what goes into our mouths.

And now, Matthew chooses to identify the woman seeking help as a Canaanite.

It is interesting to note that there was no land known as Canaan at this particular time in history.

Matthew uses the term Canaanite to identify her as an enemy of Israel, someone outside of Jesus’ community.

Jesus is faced with a plea for help from someone considered an outsider, a dog.

By the end of the story, her daughter has been healed -- but between the crying and the healing, Jesus says some terrible things.

He’s arrogant, racist and just plain mean.

We may believe that Jesus was “truly human,” but we don’t want him to be too human.

This woman, whose name we do not know, is following Jesus and the disciples, crying out for help.

The disciples urge Jesus to send her away.

Jesus, speaking to the disciples says, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel” indicating that he wasn’t even going to speak to the woman to send her away.

But this tenacious woman – seeking help for her sick child – places herself right in front of Jesus and kneels at his feet.

She addresses Jesus as Lord and begs for help.

Jesus is stopped by this.

He addresses the woman directly with words that sound unkind,

“It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

He is prepared to dismiss her but this feisty woman keeps going.

She is not deterred by Jesus calling her a dog or dismissing her.

She has a sick child and she has heard that this man can help.

She points out that “even the dogs get to eat the crumbs that fall from the table.”

Wow.

Can’t you just imagine the tension among the disciples and the crowd?

How could anyone be so bold as to speak to Jesus in such a way?

What will he say?

Well, this woman speaks truth to power and in asking for a crumb is given a seat at the table.

Jesus welcomes her into his heart, acclaiming that she is one of great faith.

“Woman, great is your faith. Let it be done for you as you wish.”

I find myself cheering for this woman.

I have known this woman.

I spent many years as a woman’s advocate urging those without voice to speak up.

Battered women, poor women, women with HIV, homeless women, all considered outsiders, dogs, by the powerful.

Yet, over and over again, I was witness to amazing courage as these women stood up for what they needed to save their families, sometimes to save their lives.

I have heard this Canaanite woman standing up to police officers in a domestic violence situation arguing for the time to call someone to watch her children before she and her husband are taken to jail;

I have heard her in court explaining to a dismissive judge why she must have custody of her children for their own safety;

I have heard this woman on the streets begging for a few cents to buy milk for a baby;

I have heard her in the Emergency Room calling for help for a child who doesn’t understand waiting for care.

Each of these women, our neighbors, our sisters maybe even ourselves, cry out to the Lord for help when everything else seems helpless.

Where do you see yourself in this story?

Are you one of the disciples, encouraging Jesus to send this annoying woman away?

Do you hear the voices of those in the world crying out for crumbs?

Have you ever looked down on another person, judging them as less important than yourself?

These are difficult questions and as Christians, we are called to answer them.

We are called to examine our own beliefs and to be certain that we are living them out in way that would have Jesus acclaim, "Great is your faith."

Perhaps you see yourself as the woman in the story.

Maybe you have had to fight for health care for your family or good schools for your children.

Perhaps there has been a time in your life when you put everything you had on the line to ensure the well being of those whom you love.

This too, is part of our calling as Christians.

To risk everything, trusting that God is with us every step of the way and will respond to our steadfast faith.

Could you see yourself as Jesus in this story?

Jesus was converted that day to a larger vision of the commonwealth of God.

The Canaanite woman taught Jesus that she and her daughter deserve more than crumbs.

Jesus saw and heard a fuller revelation of God in the voice and in the face of the Canaanite woman.

At the end of this chapter there is another feeding story.

This time 4000 men are fed -- besides women and children -- and there were seven baskets left over.

Seven is the number of wholeness, completeness, a number encompassing the nations.

After this encounter Jesus went on to feed those who had not yet been fed.

Could your heart be changed by the pleas of a desperate person?

Would you be willing to change your position about a person or a group of people whom you have judged?

Do you have the capacity to move from disdain to love?

This is perhaps our highest calling as Christians.

We believe in forgiveness.

We believe in transformation.

We believe in grace.

Each generation has people who are kept at the margins.

And each generation, someone new is welcomed to the table.

One of the reasons I am so pleased to be here today is that it is a testament to ecumenical understanding.

By inviting me to your church, Father Joe is making a statement that would have been unthinkable only a few decades ago.

Today, Protestants and Catholics can celebrate our shared Christian heritage.

I am hopeful that in the years to come, our country will become a place where inter-religious dialogue and respect is commonplace.

Each one of the world religions calls on their followers to adhere to some form of the golden rule,

“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

This is the lesson that Jesus learned from the assertive Canaanite women and it is a lesson that you and I can embrace as well.

We are each one of us created in God’s image and live our lives as beloved children of God.

What peace we will find when we live by those beliefs and welcome all of God’s children into the kingdom.

It is for this that I pray.

Amen.