



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

The Reverend Manisha Dostert

"Crumbs" - The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost - 8/16/2020

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our father, and the Lord, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

One of the great pandemic stuck-at-home films that we all probably watched was the great family film, the Princess Bride. It's fun. It's swashbuckling. It's part romance, part adventure, part tale of revenge. And it's eminently quotable. I think everyone who's ever watched it knows this line by heart, said by the Spaniard, played by Mandy Patinkin, "My name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die."

And there's that other classic line that is uttered in the beginning of the film when the hero and the heroine meet each other. There's Buttercup and Wesley and they are local peasants. They're on a farm and their neighbors. And every time Buttercup sees Wesley, she always talks down to him and she calls him farm boy. "Farm boy, fetch me some water. Farm boy, shine my saddle." And Wesley, every time that he gets ordered around by Buttercup, responds with three words: As you wish.

Now, as the story goes on, they begin to fall in love and it becomes a secret code to them. So that every time he utters, as you wish, what he's really saying to her is I love you. And that makes sense because that's really what it means to say, as you wish. You're really saying to someone that I will do whatever it is that you need, because I honor you, I respect you and I want the best for you. In other words, I'm yours and everything I have is yours. And I am utterly committed to you.

I thought of this as I read our gospel, which has to be one of the harder things to read in the Bible, thanks to the refusal of Jesus, of the Canaanite woman's request. And then the insult. And now there are those who try to explain away the insult and try to put Jesus in the best light and say really what Jesus was doing was testing the Canaanite woman to see if she persists. But I'm not sure that's any better because life is hard enough between us humans. We have enough difficulty. I don't want to think that on top of that, we have a divine being testing us.

So we're left with a conundrum. Jesus, who's blatant disregard for this woman cannot be ignored. Now she's a Gentile and she approaches the very Jewish man and she begs Him to have mercy on her because her daughter is possessed by a demon. Jesus absolutely refuses to acknowledge her. There's a 15th century painting of this in which she is begging Him and He has His back to her. She keeps shouting, have mercy on me, Son of David! And the disciples are annoyed and they try to tell Jesus, make her stop. This is bad. The sounds that she was emitting were so difficult to hear, and she was just sort of overtaking all their space and they just needed her to go away because she was annoying.

And then finally Jesus addresses her. And He says to her, your concern is of no concern of mine because I've come for the lost sheep of Israel and you are not one of them. You are not my kind, you are Gentile. But this Gentile, she will not relent. In an act of total desperation, she gets down on her knees and she looks up to Him and she says, Lord, help me. Help me, Lord. Can you remember when you were on your knees begging the same thing? Help me, Lord.

But this engendered nothing from Jesus but a wall of exclusion of privilege, of a bold declaration of who's allowed at the table and who is not. So when Jesus says it is not fair - it is not fair to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs, He is throwing all His weight against her, and to make it clear that this is not for her, because the word "not fair" actually means it wasn't morally right for Him to do so. To give anything to her would have been wrong to do.

And then there's the insult. Back then, when you called someone a dog, well, it's actually no different than when you do it today in our own language. When you call a woman a dog, it's a total word of contempt for her. And it was meant to be a slur and it was meant to put her in her place. I want you to imagine yourself in that kind of position, you are on your knees in this most subservient humiliating position, and you've first been ignored. And then everybody's sort of talking about you and trying to then shut you up. And then the one who actually has the ability to choose change everything turns around and insults you in your face.

Now, this woman who is clearly intelligent, whose response actually proves that she would be an amazing lawyer in another time and another place, she's actually an even more amazing theologian because she says to the Savior of the World, there's always enough food. The crumbs will feed all of us dogs.

Did all of us mutts hear that? That's what God's grace looks like. It cannot be metered out. It can't be hoarded. And it's not for a certain group of people or a certain kind of people. This is God. There's always more than enough. Even the crumbs will satisfy our every need. Every single pitiable creature in the world will get exactly what they need because what kind of God do you think we would have if the tiniest bits of grace couldn't save us from peril?

And that's why this Canaanite woman is a superb theologian. She knows that grace belongs to all of us, not a single human being, not a single human being is denied the gift of God's mercy and grace, no matter how despised they are. No matter how despicable they are, no matter how low they are or how much they are hated. I think all of us are surprised by grace, not just that it extends to those whom we're convinced do not deserve it for all the morally right reasons. We're surprised by grace because we realize that you and I can ask for God's mercy, even when we are at our most despicable.

Now you may not have been deserving of mercy in your life, or you may have brought doom on yourself or made mistakes or committed atrocities. So to all of you dogs out there, you're the ones who can get up in Jesus's business and shout as loud as you can, Jesus help me! And you who are desperate in your life for whatever reason; your job's a disaster. You're over your head in debt. Your relationships are failing. You're making mistakes left and right. Your family's a mess. You can't seem to change your bad behavior. You're in trouble or you're lonely. You need to believe that you deserve God's grace, though you did nothing to earn it, and that you can shout out over and over again, help me, Lord! Help me, Lord! You go on asking, don't stop.

Now Jesus's response to the woman is fascinating in its own right because this is the man who refused to give what was due to her. And then He gets schooled by her, and then He understands what's happening. And He says, woman, great is your faith. I had to think about this for a while because I was wondering what faith is He referring to? Is it the fact that she's a Gentile, she's not a Jew and she calls Him Son of David, indicating that maybe she took some energy to learn more about this different religion, and so she's participating that. Or is it because the Son of David is of course known to be the Messiah, the one who has come to save Israel and she's acknowledging that, is that what her faith consists of?

But I actually think it's more simple than that. And that's the good news for us. This woman's faith is great because she had nothing and yet she still believed and trusted that Jesus would save her and her daughter. And that is the essence of our faith. When we're bereft, when we're despondent, when we have all of our options exhausted, we are actually at the point where we can have the greatest amount of faith.

So this word is for all of you who are struggling quietly or not so quietly. Your faith is the greatest possession you have and it's actually made larger by the greater of your loss. The greater your fear, the greater your failure. But what's even more astounding is that when we have nothing but our faith, it is then and only then, I think we discover the most beautiful gift from God. Because Jesus says, after He tells her her faith is great, He says three extraordinary words to this dog, "As you wish."

Did you catch that? Jesus says to us, as you wish, the three words that symbolize a love that's greater than we can imagine. Jesus says to all of us dogs, I respect you. I honor you. I give you everything because everything I have is yours and I am absolutely committed to you.

May your troubles be little in this world, filled with pain and strife, but should you find yourself on your knees begging God, help me, Lord. When you think God is ignoring you and you're pleading for even a little morsel that can be spared to help you, may you know that at that moment, your faith is greater than can ever be imagined and that has ever been. And the greatest Savior of the World turns to you and looks at you and says, as you wish.

Amen.

[End of Recording]