

Crumbs lead to a place at the table.

(Sermon by Cheryl Williams, preached at Footscray Baptist on August 16th, 2026 – Matthew 15:21-28)

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I first met B when I started working at this church. He sometimes slept on the verandah. He had grown up here, having fled from Sudan with his family. Trauma from that and family dysfunction meant he often slept rough and had some mental health challenges. He was well known in this area, and many were frightened of him, as he would go about the streets yelling out. I have escorted many people of the property when they were leaving as they were scared of him. I struck up a good relationship with him, we talked about his family and background, about faith and I would explain to him why some people got a bit scared of him. Many times, I walked up and down the driveway with him as he paced and muttered. He was harmless really and quite easy to calm down when he was agitated. However, many would cross the road to avoid people like him. We have all done this at times haven't we, not wanted to go near someone have an 'episode' on the street or in a shopping centre or in some public space.

So, I can understand why the disciples urged Jesus to send the woman in today's story away.

Desperate situations often call for desperate measures, and this is what is happening here for this woman. She is desperate, her daughter is afflicted by some kind of mental illness, and she is now at her wits end. So desperate, she a woman, she a foreigner decides to approach Jesus (a man and Jewish) to see if he can help. No doubt she had been told not to beg and whine, not to shout and scream, but her situation, her desperation had emboldened her. What parent wouldn't go to extraordinary lengths to get the help their child needed?

Taking a big risk and summoning up all her courage she approaches Jesus, approaches him in the knowledge that he has a history of helping those on the margins of society.

What happens next, I think, is quite disturbing. Let's turn back to the text and see how both Jesus and the disciples respond.

First, she cried out asking for compassion, tells them of her situation in a nutshell, and calls him by name, Lord. She is respectful, albeit she is shouting a bit, but she needed to be heard. The response - she is **ignored**.

Next, the disciples urge Jesus to send her away because she is shouting. Now she has been **shunned**.

Jesus, then effectively excludes her from any help, saying he has only come for those from Israel, foreigners are **excluded**.

Increasingly desperate, she now kneels and begs for Jesus' help. The response this time is to **insult** her. In effect he calls her a 'dog' and again says she is excluded from God's grace and compassion.

I don't know about you, but I would have at this point been enraged, disgusted and ready to call Jesus for everything.

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Look at what she does next. She takes him on; she doesn't take the insult lying down. If he can answer her with a cryptic and demeaning response, well she has an even better come back line. Cleverly, she takes his analogy further and suggests even dogs get something from the table, that even the least of the least don't go hungry.

This makes Jesus turn around. He changes his mind. He calls her woman, which is much better than referring to her as a 'dog'. He grants her, her initial request and her daughter is made well.

This story is disturbing on a number of levels. First, Jesus seems to act really out of character. Secondly, the treatment of this woman is unacceptable - ignored, shunned, excluded and insulted.

What was happening for Jesus in this encounter? Perhaps we could excuse him by saying he was just having an off day, perhaps he was really tired, perhaps he misspoke and didn't really mean to be so rude. I think these excuses are cop outs, that there was something much deeper going on. Being tired or grumpy never stopped Jesus from treating people with compassion before, so what is it about this encounter that stops him?

We need to remember that Jews and Canaanites did not like each other. Jesus was a Jew and she a Canaanite. Jesus was male, she female. I think in this story that we see Jesus as a product of the society he grew up in, with all its prejudice and we are not used to seeing that.

Yet in the end Jesus changes his mind. Why?

She is feisty. She is courageous. She shows herself to be clever, to be as good at Rabbinic debate as he. She is determined. She is persistent. She challenges him to live up to being who he says he is - one who has come to reveal God's kingdom of love for all and refused to prop up the status quo. He has refused to prop up the status quo time and time again. She knows she too has a place at the table.

In this crummy situation, the comments of the woman **changes Jesus' mind**. He is humble enough to realise his error and change his attitude. She is courageous and it changes Jesus. She has faith in both Jesus and herself. Both are transformed by this encounter. In this encounter the barriers are broken down.

This story is a paradigm for many in our world. Many minority groups in our world have been and are treated just as badly as this woman. Their needs are ignored, they are snubbed, they are turned away or excluded and at times ridiculed and made fun of. Think about how we have treated indigenous people in this country, think about how women have been treated both in the church and wider society in the past, think about our treatment of asylum seekers in this country. Think about how we treat people living with disability, those whose sexuality is different from ours, those who live with addictions, those who are homeless and the list goes on.

The way in which Jesus changes his mind is instructive for us. His bias and prejudices are highlighted and he changes; he offers compassion and mercy. We too often need our bias and prejudices confronted, we too need to be forced to think about how we should

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be behaving, how we should be practicing our Chirstian beliefs, how we should be living out our faith. This story reminds us we have no excuse to ignore, exclude or insult others no matter who they are. We are called to err on the side of compassion, inclusion, justice and welcome, to offer mercy to all.

May we go from this place today determined and persistent in erring on the side of compassion and justice. The crumbs of grace, love and mercy are available to all, and everyone has a place at the table. May we go out from here humble enough to listen to those who are different from us and learn from them and even change our minds.

A woman's courageous rebuttal about crumbs under the table leads to finding her place at the table of God. Amen.