

THE
FIFTEENTH
SUNDAY
AFTER
PENTECOST

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Out on the Edge

What does it feel like to beg for crumbs? What does it mean to feel so desperate that you no longer care what anyone else thinks of you and the only thing you care about is finding relief from a despairing situation?

So let's think on how it is when the structures of polite society have broken down. What is it like when you are no longer in a position to carefully conceal the painful ways that life has fallen short? To those not so at risk, people on the edge of life can appear shrill and grasping and even ungrateful for the crumbs that do come their way.

I remember the first time I worked with the homeless was in the church that sent me to seminary. We opened our doors on Sunday evenings and typically served about 30-50 people a basic meal of hot dogs or sloppy Joes, or soup and sandwiches of some sort. And volunteers were to serve were often hard to come by.

The volunteers that did come were generally wonderful people, but often just too overwhelmed by what they saw on these Sundays nights to come more than just sporadically. But my most disturbing memory of that time was an evening when a retired businessman and long time member of the church came to help serve.

Now, most of the people who came to eat with us on Sunday nights were fairly regular attendees at this meal. By and large they found it a place of welcome and they were generally relaxed and more often than not the parish hall echoed with laughter and conversation that would have been the norm at about anywhere people were gathered to eat a meal together.

Well, this particular night, this particular volunteer, in the midst of serving, became very irate and agitated because a few of our guests would not say "thank you" as they received their plates from him at the window through which we served. Ultimately he took it upon himself to teach "these people" some manners.

Thankfully, his efforts at reform were nipped in the bud, but not without some tense moments of failed hospitality to the men and women we had invited to come and be fed.

Now, I do not believe this misguided parishioner was a bad or heartless person, in fact I know that he raised funds from his business contacts to underwrite those very same Sunday night meals from which he had to be ushered away.

His challenge was that his life had been so shielded from any real poverty or disruption that when faced with those folks who live out on the edge everyday he couldn't understand that the polite rules of society were perhaps the first thing to go when life takes a desperate downturn.

Whether we want to admit it or not, the painful truth is that human beings suffer from a deep insecurity that pushes us to create rules that give status and value to some while denigrating others.

In Jesus' time the poor, the infirm, the orphaned, the mentally ill, the alien and many women lived without status. In our own time we still see many of these same barriers that are designed to keep certain people out on the edge, on the margins of life.¹ Or in our religious systems we declare some people worthy of full inclusion while demanding that others must be marginalized.

We are not exactly inclined to forgiveness on a societal scale; we would rather throw our homeless, our mentally ill and our drug addicted in jail than have to see in *their* pain our own failure to create a world where such poverty or illness cannot happen.

We would rather keep our church doors locked than throw them wide to receive every person as a full and beloved child of God

I believe that Jesus' encounter with this nameless woman has much to teach us about the nature of God's true intentions for the human family. And this woman's tenacity and courage reveal that those who appear strident or impolite to the affluent or unafflicted are in fact there to heal us of our own blindness.

I like this woman's style. "She has heard about this Jewish messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. Word on the street is that he turns clear, cool water into rich red wine. He takes a few loaves and fishes from one boy and feeds thousands. And now somehow somehow he is in her town---he has come to the place where she and her tormented daughter live on the edge of existence.

It has probably been a long time since this woman enjoyed a banquet. She has almost forgotten how to claim her place at table. But she has heard about Jesus of Nazareth. She knows he has something from God to feed people. And she intends to get some of that something for her daughter. Crumbs; she will take crumbs if that is all she can get."²

Who knows what finally pushed her over the edge where she was willing to risk rejection, humiliation and social ridicule. Maybe she had simply stared helplessly at her daughter's pain as long as she could and she just didn't care what people thought of her---she had had enough!

I imagine her decision was kind of sudden. She's sitting in her house and she jumps up from her empty table and runs out the door into the midday heat to look for this Jew, this Jesus of Nazareth.

And what about Jesus? What about this disturbing tired and grumpy Jesus? It seems as though he's just about had enough as well. He seems tired of fighting with the rigid religious leadership of his day. He appears to have had enough of his disciples continued clueless--ness and grasping for position so he even leaves them behind as he seeks just to be left alone for a while.

He heads out the door and hits the dusty road and heads out to the far edges of Israel---he is "out there" figuratively and literally---he is literally on the border. He is "on the boundary between the old and the new, between male and female, between Jew and Gentile, between friend and enemy, between the holy and the demonic."³

Something powerful and profound is happening. Today we see that it is here, out on the edge, on the borderlines of existence, where we find the potential for great courage and deeper understanding...it is here out on the edge of life where poverty, isolation, fatigue, desperation, and anxiety can call us to a new understanding of how to share the love of God.

But Jesus' words are harsh to our ears, how can these be words of hope and mercy? Is even Jesus subject to the darkness of racism and nationalism? Is he being callous and dismissive to this woman's desperate plea?

Some commentators have tried to say that Jesus said these words with humor or teasing, but that simply is not so.

¹ Amy Howe in *Feasting on the Word* Year B Volume 4.

² S.N-McJilton

³ Thomas G. Long

What is happening here is far more profound and meaningful--- and besides, we all know racist jokes simply are not funny—then or now!

What we see here today is an amazing acknowledgment by Jesus, ----maybe for the first time that God has in fact sent him to the whole world. In last week's gospel we heard Jesus declare "all foods clean" and today he declares all persons clean. In this phenomenal moment we see that there is in fact a wideness in God's mercy that has no limits.

Jesus and the Syrophenician woman collide out there on the edge and this woman calls Jesus to a deeper understanding of his mission of compassion and mercy. We see God's deeper initiative spelled out in her fearless desperation.

Our eyes are opened to see that what others would have called a "worthless gentile girl whose mind was devoured by a demon" and a "good for nothing deaf man who couldn't even speak clearly" are in fact children of God meant to be embraced and valued.

When we are able to see beyond our sometimes rabid fear or deep misunderstanding of those who are not like us, we are then able to comprehend that in fact there are no external barriers between God and *any* human being: not class, race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation or physical condition.

Consequently there should also be no such barriers between human beings because when we place barriers between ourselves and others, we also put barriers between ourselves and God. We are reminded that status of any kind is only a product of our imaginations and that status or pride of place is in fact invisible to God.

Today Jesus has shown us how to repent of such things. Our task is to be fearless in discovering our own hidden prejudices and predispositions and dare to let our own hearts and minds open wide.

May we all have the courage to go out and meet Jesus and this woman and live our lives out on the edge. Amen.

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