

6 September, 2009; Proper 18b  
Isaiah 35:4-7a; Ps 146  
James 2:1-10, 14-17; Mark 7:24-37

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In 1933, the society pages of *The New York Times* reported that several hundred guests attending a lavish party at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel had been heartily diverted by a new kind of amusement called a “scavenger hunt.” The guests went hunting through the streets and shops of Manhattan, looking for items on “a ridiculously heterogeneous list of articles.” Dorothy Day, editor of *The Catholic Worker*, replied that “any morning before and after Mass and straight through the day, there is a ‘scavenger hunt’ going on up and down Fifteenth Street...and through all the streets of the city: people going through garbage and ash cans to see what they can find in the way of a heterogeneous list of articles. The *Times* does not state what these things were but probably the list was made up of something delightfully and quaintly absurd such as old shoes, bits of string, cardboard boxes, wire, old furniture, clothing, and food.” She concludes, “If the several hundred guests at the Waldorf had to scavenge night after night and morning after morning, the hunt would not have had such an enthusiastic response.”<sup>1</sup>

The *Times*’ society figures and Dorothy Day’s unemployed depression-era workers were near neighbors, passing one another daily in the streets of Manhattan, but they inhabited different worlds. For one group of people, the Great Depression was a daily humiliation: waiting in line for free cups of morning coffee, sleeping in the streets on cardboard boxes (when they could get them), shunning the city’s shelters, which wrenched apart families, separating men from women and women from children. For the other group, life was a Hollywood film: parties, games, elegant clothing, the excitement of jazz and new-fangled automobiles. It hardly seemed possible that two such different existences could be lived within one country, and yet, such disparities are nothing new.

St. James rails against them in his letter, crying out: “Do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? ...Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor.” (James 2:1, 5-6) It may seem strange that James describes acts of favoritism as a failure of belief, rather than of action, but his point is simple: What we profess with our lips is easily said and easily forgotten. It is the way we live our lives which reveals the true compass of our souls.

Even Christ wrestled with the question of who is in and who is out and who is really human. Today’s story from the Gospel of Mark depicts, perhaps, the ugliest moment in his ministry, the one in which he seems to be in danger of forgetting who he is and what he came to do, but, if we have the patience to stick with it for a few minutes, it can show us much about redeeming grace in our own reality. Mark tells us that Jesus was traveling with the disciples, and did not wish anyone to know that he was abroad. And yet, a desperate woman found him, a woman whose little daughter was sick with an unclean spirit, and she begged him to heal her child. So far, she sounds like so many other supplicants who had come to Christ and been helped, but here the story goes wrong. The woman, Mark reports, was a Gentile, a Syrophenecian. In other words, she was a Canaanite, one of the despised enemies of Israel, a people who despised Israel in their turn. She was still, of course, a child of God, but Jesus seems almost not to see it. Instead, he tells her: “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” (Mark 7:27) In almost every other encounter Christ has during his ministry, he builds relationships with people; even when condemning the Pharisees, he stands in the tradition of the prophets, trying to recall them to

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<sup>1</sup> Dorothy Day, “Day After Day”, November 1933, excerpted in *Selected Writings*, ed. Robert Ellsberg, p.58.

faithfulness. But here, he denies relationship with the woman, separating her from those he calls “children.” Underneath, there is an eerie echo of God’s words to Hosea: “You are not my people, and I am not your God.” (Hos 1:9)

But the woman does not accept the broken relationship. Instead, she stands her ground, reminding Jesus that “even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” (Mark 7:28) This is a hard saying. The woman does not challenge Christ’s implication that she is not among the children, as many of us may wish that she had. She does not even argue that she isn’t a dog; instead, she uses Christ’s own flawed language to expose its inadequacy from within. She reminds Christ that the grace of God is not a limited thing to be hoarded and doled out like grain in time of famine. Rather, it is infinite: in the power of God, five loaves and two fishes can feed a thousand people, with fragments left over for meals to come. In the power of God, the bread given to the children can pass through their hands to meet the needs of other hungry creatures. In the power of God, a crumb can be enough to sustain life. Instead of asserting her rights, the woman shows Christ a faith greater than any he has ever seen. In spite of degradation, in spite of ethnic division, still she holds onto the promises of God -- and Christ is compelled to recognize her for the sister that she is. He replies, “For saying that, you may go -- the demon has left your daughter.” (Mark 7:29) In that one moment, he fulfills the rest of Hosea’s prophecy: “In the place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people’, it shall be said to them, ‘Children of the living God.’” (Hos 1:10)

For all its ugliness, I think this is one of the stories which reveal most strongly the good news that we call the Gospel. Each one of us, at some time in our lives, is confronted with the demand that we recognize the humanity of a brother or sister to whose existence offends us. Maybe it’s a person who speaks a different language, or comes from a different tribe or nation. (I hear that all the time: *Why are we giving food or healthcare to people who aren’t even American?*) Maybe it’s a boss who has been dismissive of her staff, or a racist who takes the time to lead a lost child home. These are not easy encounters. Like Christ, we are often tempted to see the one thing in another person which gives us offense, and to use it as an excuse to refuse relationship: “You are not my people.” But these encounters are gifts which are offered to us: the opportunities which others give us to repent of our error and be saved.

The Gospel in the story, the resurrection implicit in the death, is revealed in the resilience of the woman, who refuses to let go, who refuses to go off and let her child die. The Canaanite woman did not walk away from Jesus (as she must have been tempted to do), did not leave him in his own blindness, but stayed and wrestled until he, too, could see new life. She bears witness that deep within each one of us is a Holy Spirit that yearns for life, and it is that power within us that simultaneously calls others to account for the way they have treated us, and offers them the grace of forgiveness and a new chance. Every place else in the Gospels, Jesus offers redeeming grace to us; here, the woman offers it to him. In this encounter, Christ embraces his full humanity, putting on our limitations for a moment so that he, too, can know the grace of being set free.

Few peoples reveal this resurrection spirit more powerfully than the Krio whose heritage we celebrate today, for the Krio of Sierra Leone are the descendants of people who were too often forced to beg for crumbs. (Indeed, Sierra Leone is still a country in which mere crumbs must meet great needs.) At the time of the American Revolution, England was struggling to abolish the slave trade, while the thirteen colonies still turned a blind eye to the ownership and sale of human beings. The English army took advantage of this disparity by promising freedom to any black American who fought on the Loyalist side. When the English lost, they still honored their promise, granting several thousand black soldiers the right to settle in Nova Scotia as free men. Other former slaves took advantage of the confusion and sailed for Freetown, in Sierra Leone. They were later joined by many of the settlers from Nova Scotia, who saved the colony after it had been decimated by wars with the local population. The Krio took the crumb of land that fell from the hands of the British

and built on it a country with universities, an educated people, and a Christian culture all their own. Their story is epitomized, perhaps, in that of Samuel Crowther, who was sold into slavery as a boy but later became the first African bishop of the Church of England, consecrated within the walls of Canterbury Cathedral itself.

Living in the shadow of the American Civil War, it is easy to believe that slaves were freed; in other words, that the process was passive. The example of the Krio reminds us that it was not. The same spirit which drove the Canaanite woman to uphold her humanity has compelled many thousands of enslaved persons and members of disregarded ethnic groups to seize their freedom, refusing to be relegated to the margins by false issues of race or ethnicity, and choosing instead to live as equal children of God. It is the resurrection spirit which defies the powers of death by choosing to begin again, even in a foreign land, trusting that the waters which parted to allow the Hebrews to pass from bondage will part for them as well.

But the parting of the waters is never one-sided. Scripture reports that when the Egyptians followed the Hebrews into the Red Sea, the waters closed over them and they drowned. So it is with us whenever we try to hold one another in bondage: in bondage of spirit, in the bondage of the law, or in the bondage of unfair economic practices. Our God said it starkly to the newly-liberated Hebrew people: “You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow’s garment in pledge. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this.” (Deut 24:17-18) Five times he reminds them that they were slaves, and with each one he commands them to live as a merciful people: to honor a sabbath day of rest for all people; to leave grain at the edges of their fields for the hungry; to give liberally to people in need; to release those held in bondage; to pay poor laborers promptly; to give thanks for the freedom they now enjoy by refusing to adopt the oppressive behaviors which had made them miserable when they lacked power. (Deut 5:15, 15:15, 16:12, 24:18, 24:22) And when the Hebrews eventually forgot, when they began to treat their own poor according to the cruel customs of the nations around them, then they were given the chance to experience exile again. The work of a freed people is to pass on the mercy we have received. We find our freedom only in the flourishing of others.

During her address to this summer’s General Convention, Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori commented on what she called “the great Western heresy – that we can be saved as individuals, that any of us<sup>2</sup> alone can be in right relationship with God... That individualist focus is a form of idolatry, for it puts me and my words in the place that only God can occupy, at the center of existence, as the ground of all being.”<sup>3</sup> Bishop Jefferts Schori has taken some heat for these words, mostly from people who do not want to hear the truth that she is pointing to, and which both Jesus and James remind us of today: that the love of God is inextricably united to the love of our fellow human beings. This does not mean that God does not call each one of us by name; God does, and it is up to each one of us to respond within the privacy of our heart. But that response, if genuine, will open our hearts to the lives of others, even to the lives of those we had considered contemptible. None of us will see God’s face without a company of witnesses who can say that we have shown them the mercy of God. There is no *me and Jesus* which does not become *we and Jesus*.

Dorothy Day wrote, “In Christ’s human life, there were always a few who made up for the neglect of the crowd. The shepherds did it; their hurrying to the crib atoned for the people who would flee from Christ. The wise men did it; their journey across the world made up for those who refused to stir one hand’s breadth from the routine of their lives to go to Christ.”<sup>4</sup> We could add: the

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<sup>2</sup> “Use” in her original manuscript.

<sup>3</sup> The Most Rev. Katharine Jefferts Schori, General Convention opening address, 7 July 2009.

<sup>4</sup> “Day by Day,” December 1945, in *Selected Writings*, p.96.

Canaanite woman did it when she approached her people's enemy as if he might be a friend. And we can do it, each one of us, when we approach one another expecting to find Christ there, atoning with our gentle reverence and heartfelt joy for the slights and disparagements and tribulation our neighbors have known. We cannot change the world in a breath, but we can create the church and our homes and workplaces as places of safety and refuge, where the potential of each human being is sought after and nurtured and encouraged to flourish.

When Christ returned from Tyre and Sidon, people brought to him a deaf man who could not speak. And Christ took him away from the crowd, to a place where he could be a person, not a spectacle, and he touched him and said, "Be opened." (Mark 7:34) Those are the words we hear each Sunday, when we enter the doors of our church homes: *Be opened. Let the mercy of God open your hearts. Let the love of God transform you. Let the doors of your mind swing wide to embrace this world. Let your eyes be opened to the wonder of each human being you meet. Let the crumb of my body which touches your tongue plant in you the seed of a new world. Be opened to my grace, which is sufficient for you -- for my power is made perfect in your weakness* (2 Cor 12:9). These are the words we must say to one another, in every encounter of our lives: *Be opened. It's safe. You're among friends. Be opened. And if I need it, when I need it, open my ears and my heart, too.*