

"Trying to Outdo Jesus"

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OLD TESTAMENT PSALM 133 NEW TESTAMENT MATTHEW 15:21-28

Rachel Naomi Rēmen in the book “My Grandfather’s Blessings” says that when her grandmother “was a young wife in Russia, there was not always enough food, and sometimes the family went hungry.” Her husband was the rabbi, and whatever food they had was always shared with others who had less. Rēmen’s grandmother had become skilled at improvising and making what they had go a long way, although it had not been easy.

After they moved to America, her grandmother’s kitchen was overflowing with food, but this abundance did not mean things were to be wasted. Everything was always to be used to its fullest, even tea bags – which were used twice. Occasionally an egg would fall out of the icebox and break on the kitchen floor. “My grandmother’s response, “was always the same” says Rēmen. She would look at the broken egg with satisfaction. ‘Aha,’ she would say, ‘today we have a sponge cake!’” I guess if the world had handed her nothing but lemons, she would have made lemonade.

Rēmen’s is a story about scarcity and abundance, the abundance of being treated to sponge cake, only after discovering the blessing of getting by with what little you have. And Matthew’s story of Jesus and the Canaanite Woman is likewise about scarcity and abundance, the abundance of **God’s love and healing presence**. *That’s what’s truly important in life.*

As Matthew tells it, Jesus leaves Galilee and travels to a foreign land, the district of Tyre and Sidon. While there, a Canaanite woman, a gentile, approaches him shouting: “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” But Jesus does not answer her at all. And this leaves his disciples wondering what to do about her. They’ve just arrived from Galilee after a lengthy period of public ministry (Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, countless teachings and parables, miraculous healings, and being confronted right and left by the Pharisees). And the first thing that happens? They’re confronted by one more person, a woman in need of healing. And in that moment, Jesus has nothing to say.

Do you ever get home after a long day and just have nothing left to give? Someone asks you a question and you can’t even answer. It’s not that you don’t care; you just need a moment for your body catch up with your desire to help. Opinions vary regarding what Jesus meant by not answering the woman right away. Some commentators believe it’s meant to underscore God’s focus on the covenant with Israel. Remember, it was only the Apostle Paul who bothered to share the gospel with Gentiles, while the 12 disciples focused primarily on their Jewish brothers and sisters.

Others scholars see the phrase “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” as not so much excluding others, but rather as highlighting God’s concern for all of Israel, and not just the social outcasts. In other words, the entire nation of Israel is seen as lost sheep; rich and poor alike need to be paying attention to Jesus’ message, maybe the rich even more so.

But perhaps the best way to figure out what Jesus meant by saying nothing at all to the woman is to look at what happens next. The woman asks that her daughter be healed; Jesus says nothing, and *then* his disciples step in with a solution. “Send her away,” they say, “for she keeps shouting after us.”

Everything else that occurs can be seen in response to the disciples. Jesus says nothing to the women, but in answer to *the disciples* he says, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Whether Jesus meant this and later changes his mind and decides to heal the woman is not as big a question as what’s going to happen next as the story unfolds. After all, Jesus was fully human and fully God, and based on his humanity, most commentators allow room for Jesus to change his mind. They point out that ours is a living faith and that how God shows up in our lives *does* depend on our thoughts, words and actions.

Or as Max Lucado, well know author and speaker, says it, “God loves you just the way you are, but he doesn't want to leave you there. He wants you to be just like Jesus.”¹ And what does Jesus do next? That’s really the focus of the story. Regardless of why he says it, Jesus’ statement about being sent only to the house of Israel gives rise to a discussion of scarcity, abundance and faith.

“Lord, help me,” cries the woman. And Jesus answers, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” While clearly those are some very harsh words, they do raise the question of scarcity and privilege, and open the way for a display of great faith, a faith that *has* Jesus heal this woman’s child immediately.

With Jesus – with God – there is absolutely no reason to believe there’s not enough healing to go around. There’s no reason to believe that some people are more deserving than others, when it comes to food and other basic necessities. Not enough food, not enough money, not enough love, not enough time, not enough energy – these are all human limitations, human limitations that arise out of our quest for more than what we truly need to get by in life, a quest that in the end, produces abundance for some, and scarcity for others. If you’re feeling like there’s not enough love in the world; not enough care, concern, food, affordable housing, global peace it’s not because God has not made it available to us. It’s because we cannot manage to share it with each other.

Two old friends met one day after many years. One attended college, and now is very successful. The other did not attend college and never had much ambition. The successful one asked his old friend, “How has everything been going with you?” “Well, said the other, “one day I opened the Bible at random, and dropped my finger on a word and it was ‘oil.’ So, I invested in oil, and boy, did the oil wells gush. Then another day I dropped my finger on another word and it was ‘gold.’ So, I invested in gold and those mines really produced.

¹ “Max's Maxims,” Christianity Today, February 8, 1999, 67.

Now, I'm as rich as Rockefeller.” The successful friend was so taken by this that he rushed to his hotel room, grabbed a Gideon Bible, flipped it open, and dropped his finger on a page.

He opened his eyes and his finger rested on the words, “Chapter Eleven.” One guy gets rich and the other, in his quest to equal those riches, goes broke. *Scarcity comes from trying to outdo the next guy* – or gal – rather than living within our means and being happy with what we have. Had the successful friend opened his eyes to what he had rather than focusing on how easy his buddy struck it rich, he would have seen that there’s plenty for both of them, plenty, in fact for everyone to get by just fine.

As our New Testament Lesson shows, there truly is enough in this world to go around. In that case, enough healing even for a woman from Canaan, who is a foreigner. The disciples’ response to this woman is one of scarcity. And Jesus plays into it. “I was sent only to ... Israel,” he says. “It is not fair to take the children’s food,” he says, “and throw it to the dogs, he says.” These are the comments that would send someone away in need. As if there’s not enough Jesus to go around, not enough food in the world to share from atop the table. And the woman calls them on it. “Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” Here, the woman not only calls them on it, but she also points to the abundance of God’s love and care for us all.

In the abundance of God, she knows that Jesus can heal her daughter just easily as brushing crumbs off a table. And so he does, instantly. Jesus responds to her faith, a faith that sees that God is so great as to take care of all God’s creatures, dogs under the table, lilies of the fields, birds of the air, and people in this church, those throughout our community, and across the globe.

The question for us is, do *we* recognize such greatness in the abundance of God? Threatened with our own sense of scarcity, how do we respond? If scarcity comes from trying to outdo each other, then *abundance comes from trying to outdo Jesus*. Now, of course, we can’t outdo Jesus, but if we try ...; if we set that as our goal, think of the abundance. The Canaanite woman was not afraid to confront Jesus and his disciples based on what she believed about God.

Does our faith challenge us to live our lives trying to outdo Jesus and the disciples, or at least live up to their example? Do we have a faith in God that allows us to give freely in meeting the needs of others – whether they be friend or foreigner, rich or poor? Do we see the world as a place of abundance or scarcity?

How we answer that question will determine what we do with the eggs that land on our kitchen floor? Will we thoughtlessly sweep them away as if what little we have is not enough to help somebody else, or can we see that in the midst of any scarcity – poverty, illness, loneliness – there’s enough love and care to go around. So much so, that we need not worry about getting our fair share; we need not scrape and scheme to get more than the next person. All we need to do is challenge ourselves; challenge the world, to have faith in the abundance of God.

But to do that, we need to rethink who we are as a people. Are we a people of nations or a people of God? Is America really a country of “haves” and “have nots?” Is that just the way the world is? Or is there hope for a better way?

God is willing to let our lives play out in whatever way we choose. We can treat each other like dogs who have to scrape by for everything we get, or we can share what we have – crumbs though it may be – so that everyone can be well fed and cared for. It’s our choice. ***It’s our challenge.*** Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Pray with me now, this Celtic Blessing for the Senses:

May your body be blessed. May you realize that your body is a faithful and beautiful friend of your soul. And may you be peaceful and joyful, and recognize that your senses are sacred thresholds.

May you realize that holiness is mindful – gazing, feeling, hearing and touching. May your senses gather you and bring you home.

May your senses always enable you to celebrate ... the mystery and possibilities in your presence here. May the ... Earth bless you.

O Lord, make us serene like the hills, clear like the sky, pure like the clouds, upright like the trees, warm like the sunshine, refreshing like the rain, bubbling like the stream.

(You) who makes all things and makes them beautiful; you make us beautiful, too. Allow all people of the earth to experience your presence in their lives, O God, assured of your healing in the midst of disease, your provision when there is uncertainty and want, your love which is greater than any hatred or fear.

For you, O Lord, have given us a pathway out of disease, scarcity and loneliness. You have taught us a better way, a way so simple as to be contained in a single prayer – the prayer you taught us to pray together, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done,

on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;

and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.