

**United Church of Fayetteville  
310 E. Genesee Street  
Fayetteville, NY 13066**

**Rev. Dr. Linda D. Even  
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**TABLE SCRAPS (Mark 7:24-37)**

In my home church, I was a deacon. It was the practice that every deacon usher for four months per year, both services. The ushering manual had been written by a retired Air Force colonel. Thirty-two times per year, in unison, the ushers moved forward to take the offering, left foot first, on the second bar of the offertory anthem. You know me well enough to know that while I have an extraordinarily low compulsion to comply, that kind of rigor entertains me more than it annoys me. So it was not that part of ushering that led to my declining a second term as a deacon. It was what came next. Once the offering had been dedicated, we pivoted on our inside foot, and, left foot first, carried the offering to the back of the sanctuary and down to the basement kitchen, where we prepared the bank deposit. This meant that we missed worship's conclusion, including communion. The elders did bring the bread and cup to those of us in the basement. I declined to be served, because without prayers and words of institution, it seemed nothing more than table scraps.

I don't think I am alone in my particularity about what makes communion "communion." Across Christianity, across the millennia, what the meal is made of, who makes it, who touches it, who serves it, who eats it, matters deeply to someone somewhere. None of us can point fingers to the "foolishness" of someone else's position, because while we may or may not decline to partake, we all have preferences: wine, grape juice, seated in the pews, by intinction, wafer, pita ("like Jesus used"), some other kind of bread, tear off our own piece, take a cube from the basket, have a piece handed to us, dip it in the cup, drink from the cup, sinners, outsiders just watch, or we know ourselves to be the sinners and outsiders for whom this meal was prepared... Theology, traditional practices, our own experience and comfort and varying ideas of hygiene, all effect the shape of our expectations, our appreciation, indeed our acceptance of the gifts of God for the people of God.

Of course, this text is not actually about the Last Supper, a miraculous feeding, or Jesus' table companions. In its setting, the image of a meal is metaphor for something much larger. So too is our experience of receiving the gifts of this Table a reflection of how we receive all God's blessings.

I was pushed in this direction by a few things in the text: First, it can scarcely be said that the Jesus whose response here -- "Children first, then the dogs" -- is the warm fuzzy Jesus we like to picture. His unanticipated rejection of the Syrophenician woman's request turned my attention to her. What was her response? It wasn't resignation. Nor was it what a contemporary challenge might be: upbraiding Jesus for likening her to a dog, challenging his healing capabilities or berating him for his exclusionary message. No. She accepted the meal and dog metaphor. Then she turned it to her advantage. She challenged Jesus: apparently without anger, but with wit, with courage, with faith that he could do what she asked -- and also with humility. "Look, throw me a crumb. I'll take table scraps." We don't know what she thought a crumb of healing might look like, but she was willing to accept a portion of the blessing she perceived those he called his children were getting.

Putting ourselves in that woman's place, assuming her attitude, in that moment, I think could be extraordinarily helpful for us in this moment -- as individuals, as a nation, and as a congregation, in this time in our life together, as we deal with changes in the economy and their impact on our households: depleted retirement savings, higher anxiety, longer work hours, priorities evaluated, habits or activities that once were a matter of course, now reframed as luxuries, staycations, household members returning to or going to work for the first time. It's easy for all of us to look at others who don't seem to have to make the adjustments we do; or for whom the changes seem to have more or less impact on daily living, to develop an attitude that what we have is merely "crumbs from the table" of God's bounty. When we

think everyone else is feasting, we're angry that we're only eating table scraps.

In the same way, as a congregation, it's easy for us to remember what the church was like (or at least what we imagined it was like) before: before the times changed, before the kids left home, before there were so many religions to choose from ... before... when it was different than it is now; when the culture and community were different and impacted the church in ways we didn't even realize. It's easy for us to look at megachurches or churches that are simply larger by a factor of two or five, and see the programming, services, staff or budget, and develop an attitude that what we have is merely "crumbs from the table" of God's bounty. When we think everyone else is feasting, we're angry that we're only eating table scraps.

Getting angry, as a first response, especially when it layers itself over fear or grief, is perfectly normal and human. But if that's where we stay, we run the risk of hardening anger into bitterness, and bottling fear until it becomes a paralyzing potion.

So if that's where we are, or risk staying, let's channel the Syrophenician woman for a moment. She didn't say, "Look, all I've got is crumbs. She said, "I'll take whatever you've got to give." She both narrowed her horizon and improved her vision. She stopped looking at what others were getting or had, and opened her eyes to the possibilities of how blessing might come to her.

In the beginning of the recession, news articles and magazines were filled with suggestions about how to cut back and save money. Now more than a year later, they are increasingly filled with stories of people who discovered new abilities, rewards, and relationships that evolved as a result of different patterns of living and spending. Statistical reports show that as people find they have less money to give, they are giving more time to serving their neighbors, helping those in need, and building better community relationships. It's turning out there is a lot more blessing in an economic downturn than any of us ever imagined there might be.

I am not in any way attempting to diminish or ignore the extraordinarily painful impact this recession has had on the housing, hunger and hope of the already vulnerable in our nation. I am, however, getting ready to point us as a congregation toward a renewed understanding of how we do church together and how we serve those very vulnerable among us and in the community.

As a result of both the international economic scene and our own changing demographics as a congregation, we are looking at how our church household does things, at what it means to be a vital congregation of our size and resources in this time and place. How can we best focus our human and financial resources for not only present sustenance but for a vital long-term future of ministry? What can we afford? Are there things that have become luxuries? (Yes.) Are there things we need to do for ourselves or delay until either financial or human resources are available? (Yes.) Are there things we are going to have to do without? (Yes.)

No more than it's easy for a household, (or a nation), will it be easy for us. There will be and already are uncomfortable painful feelings that come with change of this nature. Not only is such change necessary, it is possible and it is future oriented. It turns us toward a future with a God who can turn what we might think of as crumbs from the table into extraordinary blessings of healing and hope.

What happens next is up to us. Are we willing to move through grief, anger and fear, to stop defining our loss and change as "table scraps"? Are we willing to move toward more flexibility in identifying the blessings of God and develop greater willingness to receive them in forms different than in the past? Are we willing to move toward strengthened relationships, a larger community, a greater awareness of what we have to offer, and enhanced ministry in the name of Christ?

I hope so, because, if we dare, we may learn, as did the Syrophenician woman, that what Jesus offers at this Table, today and day after day, has never been crumbs or table scraps, but the whole loaf of healing, hope and possibility that comes from life with him. May it be so for us, now and forever more.