

Mark 7:24-37

September 5, 2021

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

I'm guilty...of giving the dogs scraps from my plate, even though I've heard it said many times over that's not a good practice to get into. Those two furry friends know right where to go when "people" food is in sight. I try my best not to; but, those crooked heads, wagging tails, and eyes set squarely upon me make it tough to do so. You can almost hear them saying, "Come on, just a little piece. Look at how adorable I am." I momentarily say "no", look away but it does no good. There they set still patiently longing for a tasty treat. This game could go on forever, but usually I relinquish to their begging and throw them a tiny scrap of food that causes them to wander away content their request has been met.

It's that image of begging that caught my attention this week. It ties these two healing stories together as we are told both the mother and those who brought the deaf man before Jesus "begged" him. By itself, the concept of having to "beg" Jesus may seem a bit off-putting, just as Jesus' initial response to this mother bowed before his feet may seem. Do we really worship a God we have to get on our hands and knees and plead repeatedly for mercy? For a small morsel of the abundance of grace from the great banquet table around the throne of God.

For us Lutherans and so many other Christians who joyfully, gratefully, and unconditionally rest in the sure and certain promise we are saved solely through the gift of grace bestowed upon us through the death and resurrection of Jesus this image of begging Jesus just doesn't seem to gel. It's been freely granted and given.

Yet, move beyond that initial angst and what we find is another instance of Jesus giving life to the very first words he speaks in Mark's gospel, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."
(Mark 1:14 NRSV)

Giving life to the reality that in God's kingdom there is always enough and even the smallest of scraps are filled with enough grace to bring about healing and wholeness. Painting the picture that no one stands beyond the reach of this grand and glorious kingdom. Rewriting the narrative so often written that pits one group of people against another. Or overturning the tables on popular theology of the day that deemed this man's deafness and speech impediment was brought upon by his own sinful nature. What we find in these healings are an image of a God who demands not our begging and pleading cries to be moved to action, but rather are yet again another instance of the God of love hearing the cries of humanity, peering into its eyes, and being present amidst creation that continue to groan.

Maybe this mother, these compassionate friends know something so many others in the gospel accounts just couldn't yet comprehend. Maybe they know something Martin Luther scribbled on a sheet of paper shortly before his death in 1546, which are deemed to be his last words, "We are beggars. This is true."

Being a beggar, at least to most of us, is a far-removed reality we may never have to experience. I have never had to beg for a crumb of food, a shirt for my naked body, a cup of water for my parched tongue, a roof to cover my weary head, a speck of justice where none seems to be found, a prescription for my child I couldn't afford. Being a beggar often isn't viewed in a positive light. It may carry with it the assumption that somehow the one who is a beggar has failed, or perhaps is lazy, or brought their plight in life upon themselves.

So, Luther's last words may come as a shock. "We are beggars. This is true." It runs counter to all we know. But when we strip away everything we acquire in this lifetime. When we tear down the structures, we erect to protect the comfortable world we work tirelessly to create, what do we have? What, do we come to the table of our Lord with? With what do we bow down before the foot of the cross? Ultimately, we have nothing but the grace of God to save us. There is nothing we can do on our own to earn God's favor. These final words are, in a nutshell, the very essence of Luther's life works and viewed in this light are indeed good news.

Just as Jesus' actions, teachings, and the way in which he brings salvation to the world through death on a cross upset conventional wisdom and turn the tables on so many systems, stereotypes, and ways that run counter to the kingdom he has come to usher in, maybe these stories transform our understanding of what it means to be a "beggar."

The use of this word implies there is an established special relationship between the one who is beseeching the other. This Syrophenician woman, this group living beyond the boundaries of Israel and Galilee know where to go. They know who to turn to. They know there is an abundance at Jesus' table and that in the kingdom Jesus is ushering in even a small scrap is enough to quench their appetite. So maybe it's not so much a begging as it is rather continued prayer to the one who hears every plea.

This woman knows she is a dog. She knows she is a beggar. She never denies it. Yet, she also knows there is a place for her at the table. She knows Jesus will see beyond, step outside, tear down the boundaries that have been set in place that say he should not associate with a Syrophenician, especially a woman. She knows, when others may not, he will listen. She knows when there is no where else to turn, Jesus is there.

In a world in which it may be difficult to see God is still at work, we must never lose hope that the risen Jesus continues to bring God's kingdom to reality. This is most certainly true. We are beggars. We have nothing to bring. Yet, we have a special relationship with the one that holds the bread of life. We have the assurance that when it seems no one else will listen, no one else cares, there is nowhere else to go, Jesus is always there. This relationship beckons us to sit at his feet, look into his eyes, and trust in the abundance of grace, love, and mercy that falls from his table and into our hungry souls. It also beckons us to see as Jesus sees. To see all who have no option but to "beg" for a meal, a roof over their head, or just to be seen and heard. It beckons us to be the mother who intercedes for her mother and the group who intercedes for the deaf man with a speech impediment. It beckons us to see that in the kingdom of God, we are all beggars in need of a morsel of grace.

