

## Seven Baskets of Bread

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Matthew 15:21-39

Deuteronomy 7:1-6

(This sermon gets many of its insights from a Jan. 18, 2011 article in The Banner by Syliva Keesmaat)

We've read a couple of problem passages tonight. Both of these texts have material that makes us uncomfortable, that makes us wonder. We read Deuteronomy 7 where God tells Israel to purge the nations from the land. God basically orders ethnic cleansing; that's a hard passage. It reminds us of a whole legacy of Old Testament violence. It reminds us of a whole host of other passages where something like genocide is sanctioned by God. Joshua, kill everyone in Jericho. Saul, put to death all the Amalekites. The Matthew passage has its own set of issues. Jesus says some rather harsh things to this desperate Canaanite woman. She asks for mercy and it sounds like he brushes her off not once, not twice, but three times! "Son of David, have mercy on me!" she cries. And first he answers her not at all, second he says, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel," third he asks her, "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." Ouch! Only after heroic persistence on the part of this remarkable woman does Jesus finally offer the mercy she requests. Put simply, this doesn't sound like Jesus. These are not the sort of readings that leave you immediately uplifted. But I would like to suggest that there is hope and uplift in these passages. I would like to dig deeply into these passages tonight, because I think we will find some good news underneath the questions. And I want to dig tonight by looking at a series of details in these passages and letting them speak to us.

Detail one: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Sorry ma'am. You're a gentile and you're not on my list right now. It sounds harsh, but I think it really represents how Jesus understands his mission. He really feels that his work on earth begins with preaching to God's chosen people. We know that's true because this isn't the only place where Jesus says something like this. In Matthew 10:5 he sends out the 12 disciples on their first mission and he tells them, "*Go first to the lost sheep of Israel, do not go to the gentiles!*" This doesn't mean that Jesus doesn't care about Gentiles. It doesn't mean that he doesn't think the gospel is for Gentiles, it's just that his sense of mission is that he has been sent first to preach to the Jews, and then through the Jews to have the rest of the world hear. As one person put it, Jesus understands that his job is to set the whole world on fire for the gospel, but he starts that fire by blowing on one coal in the hearth, one dying ember: the lost sheep of Israel. He begins fanning one coal into flame so that he can ignite the world.

Detail two: Verse 21 tells us that Jesus *withdrew* to the region of Tyre and Sidon. The word "withdrew" is the word *AnaChoreo*. It's a word that means to seek refuge, to withdraw. *AnaChoreo* is a word used two other times in Matthew and both times it very clearly refers to moments where Jesus is trying to get away and be alone, it very clearly refers to times where Jesus withdrew from the crush of the crowds and the demands of ministry so that he could pray and reflect and be alone with his disciples. So in our

passage, Jesus is heading out on a retreat. This is important! When the Canaanite woman comes shouting (shouting mind you!) after Jesus and he answers her not at all, it helps to know that he is looking for space. Sometimes on a Sunday night after a particularly busy church day, I'll be sitting in the family room and the phone will ring, and I will not answer it. That's not a sin, it's just human. So when Jesus, seeking isolation from the crowds, believing that his primary mission is to the Jews, finds this gentile woman making loud demands, it helps us to understand why he might have been slow to help her.

Detail three (And now we're getting deeper): Matthew calls this woman a "Canaanite" woman. You probably didn't think anything of that when I read it, but it is actually kind of strange. In the day of Jesus, 'Canaanite' would have been an old word. As Sylvia Keesmat points out in her article, you didn't call people from Tyre and Sidon Canaanites anymore; they were Syrians; they were Phoenicians. Calling this woman a Canaanite would be a little like meeting a person from Norway today and calling her a Viking. It would be like calling a modern day Egyptian an Ishmaelite. Why does Matthew use this old word? Why does he call her a Canaanite? Matthew is writing to Jews, and by calling this woman a 'Canaanite,' he is bringing to mind Old Testament passages in which God's people were told how to deal with people like this woman. The word Canaanite brings to mind passages like Deuteronomy 7 where the people were told in no certain terms how to handle these gentile tribes. *"Utterly destroy them! Make no covenant with them! Show them no mercy!"* Canaanites aren't supposed to get mercy. So when this woman – the Canaanite woman – comes along crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me!" The disciples think they know what should be done. *"No mercy to Canaanites! Send her away Jesus!"* And every member of the Jewish audience who read the gospel of Matthew would have expected Jesus to do just that! We hear this story and we think well of course Jesus will help this woman, of course Jesus will heal her daughter. But the original hearers of the gospel would have expected exactly the opposite. They would have thought, "Of course Jesus should ignore her! Of course Jesus should send her away! He knows the Scripture! He knows the law" But Jesus doesn't send her away, he talks to her, and he turns his face toward her and eventually heals her daughter. For the original hearers, for the disciples, that would have been the true offense of this passage. When you read Deuteronomy 7 and you hear about the old attitude to the 7 nations, and then you read Matthew 15 and you see what Jesus does for the Canaanite women, you realize that this is a revolutionary moment. God's salvation plan is entering a new phase.

Detail four: **"seven baskets full."** If you think that helping out the Canaanite would have surprised his original Jewish audience, just wait till you see what Jesus does next! Jesus decides to expand his mission. He goes out among these gentiles and he teaches and he heals. He begins to see these former enemies change; they give glory to the God of Israel. And then, in the climax of the story, Jesus sits them down and feeds them a miraculous meal. Those of you who really know your New Testament will know that this is actually the second time Jesus has presided over a miraculous meal. The first time was back in Matthew 14. That time Jesus fed 5000 people and there were 12 baskets of bread left over. This time he feeds 4000 and there are 7 baskets leftover. The leftovers are significant. We know that because Jesus himself says so. In Matthew 16:9 -10 Jesus confronts the disciples in a moment of low faith and he says to them, "Do you remember how many baskets we gathered after I fed the 5000? And what about the

4000, how many baskets after that one? Do you see the significance of those numbers?" They didn't, but Jesus is telling us there is a reason for 7 baskets here; there is a reason for 12 baskets after the 5000. So what's the significance? 12 is a Jewish number. Israel was composed of twelve tribes. When Jesus fed the 5000 he was feeding Jews, so the twelve baskets left over afterwards symbolize God's grace to Israel. The bread of life has come to them, and there is more than enough bread for all Israel. 7 is a universal number. It is the number of completion, the number of wholeness. When Jesus feeds the 4000 he is feeding gentiles and so when there are seven baskets leftover, that shows that the bread of life is broken for the gentiles too, and there is more than enough bread for the whole world. In her article on this text Sylvia Keesmat points out a possible connection between the 7 baskets of bread and Deuteronomy 7. In Deuteronomy 7 Moses talks about the 7 Canaanite nations Israel must drive out. But in this meal the 7 nations aren't driven away; they are given 7 loaves and 7 baskets of bread!

Detail five: "Jesus took the 7 loaves, and after he had given thanks, he broke them and gave it to his disciples." That's Matthew's way of describing how the meal started. Does that remind you of anything? Maybe the words of institution that we say at this table as we break the bread: "*On the night when he was betrayed our Lord Jesus took bread, and after giving thanks he broke it and said this is my body, given for you.*" Or maybe the words that Matthew uses to describe the Lord's Supper: "*While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it, gave it to the disciples and said, 'Take, eat.'*" What does this mean? Is this communion that Jesus offers to these Canaanites on the shores of Galilee? Some commentators – including the very well respected Dale Bruner – think so. I'm not so sure. But as Matthew tells this story he means us to *think* of the Lord's Supper. He means us to think of the covenantal meal. He draws a connection between this bread and the bread which we break that is a fellowship in the body of Christ. Deuteronomy 7 said "show no mercy to the Canaanites!" Deuteronomy 7 said "make no covenant with them!" Now we have mercy shown to the Canaanite woman and something like covenantal bread offered to her and her gentile friends. Do you see how this meal might be a gracious answer to the violence and bloodshed of the Old Testament? I don't understand why the Old Testament is so violent. I don't understand why there had to be a time when God commanded his people to kill their enemies and drive them out. I don't know why God sometimes said, "Kill everyone." I hope that someday I will understand but I don't right now and those passages make me wince. But I can live with those passages because of stories like this one. Whatever he commanded about the nations in the Old Testament, in Jesus he God shows his ultimate purpose. In Jesus, God shows what is really in his heart. In Jesus, God lays himself down for the nations, God meets old enemies with bread and grace.

Last detail: In his initial exchange with the Canaanite woman Jesus quotes a Proverb to her: "*It is not fair to take the children's food and give it to the dogs.*" That's roughly the equivalent of our proverb, "Charity begins at home." Do you remember how the woman answered Jesus quotation of the proverb? She said, "*Yes Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table.*" That's the last detail: the crumbs falling from the master's table. It sounds like a meager little bit doesn't it: a pittance, just the crumbs - not nearly enough. But when the gentiles are invited to the table, and Christ breaks the bread and passes it around, and the meal is over, what kind of crumbs are left

over? An abundance of crumbs. Seven overflowing baskets. More than we started with. It turns out to be a table of plenty.

Sometimes in the face of the troubles and needs of life, you feel as though you just don't have the resources. Life is hard. I'm barely holding myself together! I'm barely able to get the emotional resources together to care for my family. My own problems paralyze me, how can I possibly help someone else? There's not enough bread in the pantry to feed the hungers out there. Jesus, where am I going to find enough bread to feed such a great crowd? But in the gospels Jesus keeps telling these stories of abundance: loaves that feed 5000 with baskets left over, nets that overflow with fishes – so heavy that you can't even bring them in, seeds that sprout up and produce a harvest 40, 60, a hundred fold. We may not have much, but in the strange math of his grace, we have enough; enough to go to all the places of need and fear and danger, and to respond with grace.

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