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Pentecost 18B
Peace, Seattle
September 6, 2009 epk
Mark 7:24-37

CRUMBS

> [Jesus] set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet.
>
> Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone. [Mark 7:24-37]

The gospel is often most potent when it sets our imaginations on fire.
When we can see ourselves as those who encountered Jesus might have seen themselves.
When we take their places, walk in their shoes, explore the peculiarities of their stories.

In most of Jesus' encounters with others in Mark's gospel we get just a spare outline of the story. But we're given enough to imagine what a fuller telling might have looked like.

So, today, I want to share a telling of today's gospel story from the point of view of this determined Syrophoenician mother who manages to do what no other person in Mark's gospel is able to do: stand toe to toe with Jesus, and not blink**. The story is entitled: CRUMBS.**

Our daughter's troubles—our troubles—started two year ago. It was harvest time, and we were working the fields, the three of us, my husband and I, and our daughter, Shira.

Shira had always been with us during the harvest. When she was a baby, I carried her on my back. As she grew, she and the other children learned how to keep themselves occupied while we parents worked at cutting and binding the stalks of grain, loading them onto the field wagon, and carting them to the threshing floor.

By the time she was eight she could tie the sheaves, and in her tenth summer her father taught her how to hitch the mule to the wagon and lead him through the fields to collect the gathered grain.

She had a way with that old mule, Shira did! He never seemed to rebel against her gentle, musical voice!

We'd been working the fields from sun up to sun down for six days running, and the harvest was nearly done. That night, she hadn't eaten much at dinner so I told her to go in and lay down---she'd been working so hard. I was so proud of my girl!

When I checked on her an hour or so later, her temperature was up and I could see dark circles beginning to form under her eyes. A sponge bath brought a little relief, then I helped her into her night clothes and tucked her in.

YOU'LL FEEL BETTER IN THE MORNING, DEAR ONE, I told her. **It was a lie.**

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When I rose in the night to check on her, she wasn't in her bed.
I called for her, but there was no answer. I started to panic.
I shook my husband awake and we stumbled outside.

The moon was bright that night. I remember the strange dance our shadows made as we raced about from place to place, looking frantically; calling her name.

Then, we found her. She was in the chicken coop, sitting in the corner. Her clothes were in shreds; bloody scratch marks covered her face, her arms, her legs; she had soiled herself.

And worst of all, the look that met ours cut us to the quick: her eyes were vacant; not a shred of recognition in them.

We called her name and bent to lift her but she screamed bloody murder.
What had happened to our little girl?!

That was over two years ago, now. And so little had changed.
Trying to get food into her and to keep her from hurting herself—that was a full-time chore.

At first, the neighbors helped us out, as they were able.
They knew how hard it was on us. They remembered the sweet girl Shira used to be—Oh, that voice!

But when they reached the conclusion that the sweet little girl was never coming back, they slowly began to withdraw and turn away.

What little money we had, we used on physicians, but they did her no good.
A DEMON, they'd say. **What were we to do? We were at our wits end.**

And that's when I heard about him for the first time; a Jewish healer—a holy man—from Galilee. **Jesus**.

I was in Tyre for market and overheard two Jewish women speak of him as I sold them my eggs.

SO IT'S TRUE? I asked. THIS MAN IS A HEALER?

OH YES, the one said, SON OF DAVID, SOME CALL HIM. HE'S MADE MANY WELL—EVEN HEALED SOME LEPERS, FROM WHAT MY COUSIN SAID. HIS SON IS A FOLLOWER.

I DON'T SUPPOSE HE'D EVER COME OUT THIS WAY, I asked, my mind circling around this news.

ONE NEVER KNOWS, the other responded. THEY SAY HE'S GOT A MIND OF HIS OWN.

Galilee was a good three—four days journey from Tyre and even further apart as far as religion is concerned. Hardly the place for a Jewish holy man from Galilee!

Yet, as they spoke a flutter of hope touched my heart for the first time in many moons.

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In the weeks that followed the encounter, I slept poorly, my dreams were dark; my emotions up and down.

I kept up my routines, eager to give myself to anything I could that would help keep despair at bay.

At long last another market day rolled around, and rising early, I gathered my goods, kissed our daughter, and headed for Tyre, leaving her in my husband's care.

It was about midmorning when one of the women I'd met before came to my cart, looking for her eggs.

WHERE'S YOUR FRIEND? I asked, eager to strike up a conversation.

OH… HER? SHE…SHE HAS A GUEST. I'M SHOPPING FOR BOTH OF US TODAY.

Her words were carefully measured and oddly weighted. She knew something; was hiding something.

GREET HER FOR ME – I said… AND HERE—TAKE AN EXTRA EGG—FOR HER GUEST.

Our eyes met. THANK YOU she nodded. And then added, I'M GOING THERE NOW…

Whether she intended her comment as invitation or not, I can't tell you, but that's how I took it. As soon as she left, I closed my cart and hurried to follow her, keeping at a safe distance, until, some blocks later, I watched her knock at a door and enter.

My heart was beating now as I half-ran, half-walked to the home.
Standing before the door, I composed myself, and then, I knocked.

When the door opened, it was the other woman—the absent one—who appeared.
When she saw who I was a look of surprise crossed her face, and then hardened into resistance.

But before she could say anything, I blurted out, DID YOU GET YOUR EGGS?
EGGS?...OH…YES…YES I DID. THANK YOU, she replied, somewhat softer.

OUR EYES LOCKED IN AWKWARD SILENCE.

Finally, I spoke. **HE'S HERE…ISN'T HE?**
WHO? She asked.

THE MAN FROM GALILEE.

Unable to deny it, she stared at me, declaring with sudden finality: **YOU MUST GO**, and she began to shut the door.

Instinctively, I thrust my foot in the door. And finding my voice I cried:
I <u>MUST</u> SEE HIM---MY DAUGHTER!

HAVE MERCY ON ME, LORD! I shouted threw the crack in the door.
HAVE MERCY ON ME! MY DAUGHTER IS TORMENTED BY A DEMON. PLEASE HELP ME!

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Quick as a flash the woman's husband was at the door.
QUIET! He hissed. YOU'RE DISTURBING THE MASTER, WOMAN, GO AWAY, he said.

But the memory of Shira's smiling face filled my mind, and wedging my shoulder in the door, I shouted all the more, JESUS, SIR, PLEASE! HAVE MERCY! HAVE MERCY!

And finally, he came.

When the door opened I fell to my knees, put my face to the ground and begged him.
I was the wrong gender, the wrong race, the wrong religion, but none of that mattered. **Only Shira.**
LORD...MY DAUGHTER....HELP ME.

THE CHILDREN, he began in a voice at once weary and firm, THE CHILDREN SHOULD BE FED FIRST. IT'S NOT FAIR TO TAKE FOOD THAT BELONGS TO THE CHILDREN AND THROW IT TO THE DOGS.

SO, I thought, I AM A DOG, THEN? WELL, SO BE IT.

THAT MAY BE TRUE, SIR, I said, lifting my eyes to meet his, BUT EVEN THE DOGS UNDER THE TABLE EAT THE CHILDREN'S CRUMBS.

Where these words came from, I have no idea! They just came tumbling out, and suddenly the whole house was enveloped in silence.

WOMAN, he said, at last. WOMAN, FOR SAYING THAT, YOU MAY GO—THE DEMON HAS LEFT YOUR DAUGHTER.

I was speechless. I didn't---I <u>couldn't</u> say <u>anything</u>. Not even a THANK YOU escaped my lips.
I just stepped backward out of the door, turned, and started for home.

The closer I got, the more my stomach threatened to take flight. The small flutter of hope I'd felt at first was turning into a great-winged bird!

When I reached the corner I could see them sitting in front of our home, she poised calmly on her father's lap gazing intently at his large, calloused hands like a fortuneteller.

"SHIRA!" I shouted; our eyes met.
MOMMA!---she sang, jumping off her father's lap and running to me.

Between the hugs and tears Shira told me how she'd been worrying about me so, and where had I been?

I'VE BEEN TO THE CITY, TO MEET A MAN, A VERY SPECIAL MAN, I told her.

AND DID YOU MEET HIM? she asked, her clear eyes intently probing mine.

YES--OH YES, I MET HIM.
AND SOME DAY, PERHAPS…SOMEDAY, YOU WILL MEET HIM, TOO.