

Thomas R. Cook
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota
8:00 a.m. and 10:00 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist
The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost – September 6, 2015

“A Seat at the Table”

Scripture: Mark 7:24-37; 15 Pentecost B (Proper 18)

Bushy hair, black as night; dark, deep, determined eyes hidden mysteriously behind rows of overgrown shaggy brows; nose on the alert, jaws like a steel trap, teeth sharpened to grasp and tear, our labradoodle, George, lurks just below the surface of the dining room table, waiting to ensnare, to engulf, to ravage and consume any morsel of food that happens to make its way oh-so-unluckily from the table to the floor below. Be warned! Should you ever have occasion to eat at our home, keep your hands above the surface of the table, do not let them dangle, or they will fall victim to the snuffly, wet, hairy muzzle that relentlessly probes the depths, seeking, ever seeking, even that tiny crumb that rolls from the table above or clings to the hand that hangs below. It will be found, and it will be eaten.

Hey, he won't win any awards for brilliance, but George is actually a pretty intelligent dog. After all, he knows there is something on that table that's worth getting. And given the chance, he will get it. George isn't entirely content just to nibble at the crumbs and handouts we send his way, or the occasional slice of bacon

that slides accidentally from the plate. No. In fact, should we leave the table and its food unguarded, George will plant his paws right up on top and dig in with the voracity of a starving, well... dog, helping himself to all he can get before he is discovered and shooed away. Cereal and milk? Loves it. Tuna sandwich and chips? Gone. Roasted lamb with potatoes? A favorite feast. George knows what he wants, and he isn't afraid to go after it.

And I can't blame him. You know, George is adequately fed and cared for by his family. He has basic food to eat. But, after all, it's the same dog food he receives morning and night, day after day, dog food and water, water and dog food. No wonder he roams the land beneath the table, where others feast on nutritional variety and culinary delight. What he sees we have, he knows he wants and needs. It makes sense to me. It seems good to him. Of course he wants it.

And why wouldn't that Gentile woman ---treated so dismissively by Jesus--- want some of what Jesus had been laying out on the table? Why wouldn't she want the attention, the care and compassion with which he treated his followers? Why wouldn't she want something of the hope she saw him engender in his Jewish brothers and sisters? Why wouldn't she want some of that healing power given over to help her own daughter who was, as Mark says, possessed by a demon? She was sick in mind and body, not well and whole. I have no doubt that the Gentile woman

would take whatever she could get if it would help her daughter be well. And though she be treated like a dog, she's bold enough to remind Jesus that a dog might enjoy at least a crumb or two every now and then of that good, good food. Right? Please?...

How many people might we encounter on any given day who want and need something of the same?... An invitation to belong, a word of hope when all seems hopeless, a bit of help when no help seems to be found, acceptance instead of rejection. The writer of the epistle of James puts it rather bluntly, doesn't he?... "...do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?" Even Jesus had to check his judgemental attitude at the door when it came to this bold and clever woman.

And Jesus does something extraordinary. It would be as unusual and unexpected as if I were to set an extra place at the table and put a big bowl of lamb chops and potatoes and gravy down and call George to hop right up there on a chair with us to eat our food together right off the table. Not only did that Gentile woman get a morsel or a crumb; she got the whole meal. Her daughter was healed. Jesus recognized in her hopefulness, faithfulness, and cleverness. What we might call desperation, when coupled with her willingness to ask for what she needed, Jesus apparently perceived as faith. She got more than a crumb. She got a seat at Jesus'

table. I think the challenge for us is that we learn to pay attention to the needs of others – any others- and do the same.

So, imagine the veritable feast that we enjoy on this day in this place. Imagine the warmth and welcome many of you feel, though maybe not quite all. Imagine the hopefulness being in community can engender in us, imagine the opportunity to bring our cares and sorrows and lay them down for a while, imagine the opportunity to be forgiven for what we have done to hurt others or ourselves, imagine the opportunity to meet here to receive in this banquet the signs of the love which God holds for all of us, in bread and wine to receive peace and healing and hope. Why wouldn't this table be something desirable, and available, to anyone who seeks wholeness and help?

In this simple tale of a woman who hopes in the power of God, we are given a glimpse of the Kingdom of Heaven. She reminds Jesus that the doors are flung wide and the table is set for all. She reminds Jesus that our differences in race or culture are no true test of our faith; our common need for God and common desires for hope and health and comfort do not know bounds. Rich and poor stand in the same need of the grace of God. Who are we to decide who sits and who does not sit at God's table? All of us wander the floor together, and God offers us more than just the crumbs from the table. God offers us a place. We owe it to others to do the same.

So maybe faith in God isn't like a one course meal at a private table, the same ol' thing with the same ol' people day after day. Such a diet may be sufficient in the end to keep us alive, but we may miss some of the richness and brilliance of God's bounty and board along the way if we only keep our noses buried safely in the same bowl of food. Look up around God's table. Look around your church here, look out into the community around you. Look at all the variety of people coming to the table; see what gifts they bring. When God is our host, there are a lot of good things on the table to be desired by any number of people. And all are given a seat. Receive your invitation and come to the table, but extend your invitation to others and welcome them as well.