

In the name of God who through the Word and in the Spirit creates, redeems, and sanctifies. Amen.

“Mercy triumphs over judgment.” That phrase from the letter of James stood out to me the most in our readings from this week. I think it has something to say to the story of Jesus meeting the Syro-Phoenician woman in our Gospel.

Jesus’ encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman is one of my favorite episodes in Jesus’ ministry. We’re reading from the Gospel of Mark, so we see almost as much of Jesus’ human person as his divine person. In this story, we see Jesus being very human; he is exhausted, he’s looking for a place to get away, and he sneaks off into a part of Galilee populated mostly by Gentiles. You’d think he would be safely away from it all for a few days. But such is Jesus’ reputation and renown, that this Gentile woman immediately hears that he’s there and comes to him for healing for her daughter.

Our Lectionary readings spent five Sundays in August in the Gospel of John with Jesus telling everyone that he was the bread of life. Here Jesus

is in Mark telling this woman that the food he has to give is limited, and must go to the children of Israel first. Jesus is bone tired; perhaps he feels he has little left to give. And this woman, just maybe, understands.

Scholars have delved into the social setting, the geography, and the cultural norms that would have informed this meeting between Jesus and the Gentile woman. Interestingly, some scholars speculate that this woman was wealthy; that in fact, she was one of the rich urbanites whose comfort came off the hard-working backs of the poor day-labourers and farmers to whom Jesus preached the good news. Jesus, in treating her with what is without question great contempt, was reacting to a woman who would have been seen as an oppressor. In coming to Jesus, an itinerant Jewish rabbi, this woman would be casting aside all of the privileges and entitlements of her class. As a well-off Gentile in Roman occupied Galilee, she doesn't have to treat Jesus with deference; and yet, she calls him "Sir" and falls at his feet. I wonder if she, too, felt that she had little left to give. We don't hear about her family - no husband or brother or sister accompanies her on her way. We only hear of her little daughter; if this woman is the primary care-giver for her child, I wonder how exhausted she might be? How exhausted would this potentially well-off Gentile woman have to be to seek

out this wandering Jewish rabbi as soon as she learns he's in town?

Perhaps we're seeing a meeting between two people at the end of their rope who only feel they have crumbs of themselves left. Yet this woman has faith that those crumbs of themselves are enough to effect healing for someone who needs it.

Making time for rest and retreat, as Jesus was trying to do, is incredibly important in our faith life. It is difficult to allow God to work through us when we are at the end of our rope, when our well has run dry. Still, need is always around us. Jesus is so tired and cranky that, when faced with yet another demand for healing, he falls back into the contempt that poorer, rural Jews would have felt for this urban Gentile whose wealth came from their toil. This woman says, yes, there are only crumbs of you left right now; but let's see what God can do. She brings her crumbs of faith, Jesus brings his crumbs of compassion, they are put together, and they are enough.

Jesus has made the judgment that he is too exhausted to deal with this woman; there isn't enough left of him to meet her need; Jesus has made the judgment that this woman is unworthy of his aid, anyway. Mercy then

triumphs over Jesus' judgment. Unlike with other exorcisms, Jesus doesn't have to confront this unclean spirit in the woman's daughter; there is no verbal exchange between them; Jesus doesn't even have to follow the woman and see her daughter in person, as Jesus did with Jairus and his daughter. The woman tells Jesus that there is good news enough for both of them; that if they make community together at that moment, bringing together their worn-out selves, God can do what Jesus physically feels he cannot. Seeing this woman's faith, Jesus pronounces to her what has already been done by the mercy of God - the demon has left her daughter. They can both go home and get their much needed rest.

God found a way to meet an urgent need through two exhausted people without exhausting them further. The woman had enough energy to do all the running through town to find Jesus. Jesus had just enough energy to realise the truth about God's mercy that this woman spoke to him. In their encounter, God is so present in the Beloved, weary Son and in the beloved, weary woman's faith that a healing is effected for them all. Jesus has done the work that God sent him to do and so Jesus can find peaceful retreat. This Gentile woman can bring back good news to her well-off neighbours that there is Godly power at work around and among them and God's

healing is for absolutely *everybody!* Jesus will return to his ministry of healing and, just after the passage we read this morning, Jesus will find himself confronted with a hungry crowd of 4,000; but unlike the first feeding of the crowd, this time the crowd is mostly Gentile; and Jesus has compassion on them, makes community with them, and feeds them with just seven loaves, seven being the number representing fulfillment and completeness.

We are tired. We are tired of masking and of variants and of risk and uncertainty. We need rest in our bodies and in our spirits; we need to rest in our belovedness so that we can turn to one another in compassion and make community to meet the needs we see around us. It is understandable to feel overwhelmed and decide that we simply do not have the energy or resources to meet those needs. But we have the good news the Syro-Phoenician woman preached to Jesus: God is a God of mercy; and even as we make time for our necessary rest, God can bring the crumbs of ourselves together with others who have faith and who listen to God's voice, and can bring about the healing we so desperately need. Let us make time to rest. Then let us open our eyes and hearts to those around us, each of us walking with our handfuls of crumbs, and let us bring

ourselves together in community to continue in the work that compassion calls us to do. Amen.