

**“Deep and Wide”**  
**Matthew 15:10-28**  
**Proper 14A**  
**August 14, 2011**  
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The invitations have gone out and she didn't make the list. She isn't welcome. She isn't included. Of course, it probably did not even cross their minds to include her. She is a Canaanite after all. Somehow though, this only strengthens her resolve. She is determined. Invitation or no invitation. And so she crawls on her hands and feet, like a beggar. A pitiful lady pleading for mercy. She is desperate though. Her daughter is ill. Any parent knows you will do anything, anything, for your child, even get on your hands and knees. So she cries out: Lord, have mercy! Lord, have mercy! But she is ignored. This meal is only for the folks on the guest list, and the man of the hour said that she isn't on that list. Even worse, he tells her that her presence is like a dog. *Lord, have mercy.*

This hurts. This is maddening. This is downright ridiculous. This is oh so real, though. *Lord, have mercy.*

You don't have to have lived a long time to know what this woman is feeling. There is nothing so isolating, so demeaning than being told you aren't wanted, that your presence is not welcome, that you are merely an interruption. It is like being the new kid on the block and walking in the middle school cafeteria on the first day of school and wondering where in the world you will sit. Your stomach is in knots and your palms sweat. You really aren't asking for too much except for a place to eat. But as you glance around the noisy room you know that you aren't welcome. Routines and habits have been established and there is no room for you to break in. This day, this moment, the future, in your adolescent mind, it all just feels unredeemable. *Lord, have mercy.*

Fast forward, fifteen, twenty or thirty years. You've worked so hard, planned for so long, and yet the vocation you yearned for is not what it turned out to be. You wonder what more you could have done. It seems as though everyone else is passing you by. You want to be happy for them. Really, though, you just wonder what you may have done wrong. Why, you? Why, now? Isn't this the land of opportunity? All for one, one for all. Yet, you doubt and say: *Lord, have mercy.*

Another day. Another year. This time it comes from the love that has rejected you. This was supposed to be your soul mate, but instead your soul is battered and shattered to pieces. You look around and wonder how in the world did you end up in this mess. In your heart of hearts you beg for mercy, for something to show you that all is not lost, all is not unredeemable. Still, you cry: *Lord, have mercy.*

Can anyone hear your cry? Is it all for nought? Despite our best efforts, despite what we have been taught to believe all our lives, there are some moments when we can't help but wonder whether it is all a terrible joke. Has Jesus banished us from the table?

That's what seems to have happened to the mother from Cana. This man, who is supposed to be full of compassion, has declared that he didn't come for people like her, only the Israelites. We

can try to explain this little episode away and say Jesus was just frustrated and exhausted from all the needs of everyone. We can say that Jesus has feelings just like us, and well, he, too has bad days. The truth of the matter is that this passage is disturbing because it reminds us of ourselves, our weakness, and it frightens us to think Jesus could be like us in that way.

In this moment of our Gospel lesson Matthew shows a side of Jesus that is all too human, a moment when Jesus, dining with his disciples and deeply immersed in the culture of the day, has succumbed for a moment to the traditions of the society. Many theologians argue that Matthew's version of this story, which is markedly different from the Gospel of Mark's interpretation, is written to an audience that was struggling to understand that breadth of Jesus' redeeming love. Years had since passed since Jesus walked the earth by the time Matthew wrote his Gospel, but for too long, the new community of Jesus' followers still thought they were only responsible for caring for those in their immediate vicinity, those people who were like them--Jews. And so Matthew reminds us that even Jesus was forced to confront the power of the tradition to shape his own ministry and perhaps they needed to do so also.

The exchange that takes between this hurting mother and Jesus reads like a modern day political debate. In the beginning, she just says, "Lord, have mercy," because sometimes there are just no other words. Her cries though appear to have fallen on deaf ears, and Jesus replies: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." The woman continues to keep it simple though: "Lord, help me." Indeed, there is nothing so powerful as fighting mother. But Jesus lands what could be a devastating blow and says: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." It does not devastate the woman, it only empowers her. And with a reply to silence the greatest orator, the woman fearlessly says: "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

This woman has no interest in trying to deny the assessment of her. She knows that many Jews viewed Canaanites with disdain. Instead, she looks away from the label placed upon her and turns to what she knows about Jesus--that he is merciful, that he is loving, that he is meant to transcend tradition and protocol. *Lord, have mercy.*

In Jesus' initial response and the woman's persistence we are reminded of the ways that we exclude people, the times we cast them aside because they don't fit our neat and comfortable categories. How easy it is to disregard someone because their political beliefs don't align with ours. Surely, *they* are idiots. This moment reminds us how we can let tradition dictate our actions. We can let what has been done in the past, both in our families, communities, and our own lives determine how we relate to others and whether we will let them into our circle of exclusion. At other times we love to throw out the mantle of inclusivity and diversity until we are forced to confront the reality that we really don't like change or people who are really too different from us. We don't like to face the fact that we are not always right. We don't like to confront the truth that as much as we hate not being welcomed and ache when we feel rejected, we often inflict such pain. And yet the woman pleads because all she wants and needs is to be heard, to be made part of God's redeeming love. *Lord, have mercy upon us.*

Yes, this woman did not get an invitation, but it didn't stop her. Yet, how many times have we let the labels that others have placed upon us stopped us from fully following God? How many

times have we placed the labels on others? How many times have we have designated some person or some situation as beyond redemption? My friends, the mercy we beg for ourselves is the same mercy the world needs. We are never meant just to keep it to ourselves.

When I was about five or six years old I first learned the song, “Deep and Wide.” It was at Vacation Bible School at the little Baptist church of my childhood. The song comes complete with hand motions and it goes like this: “Deep and wide. Deep and wide. There’s a fountain flowing deep and wide.” Each time the verse is repeated with ‘hmm’ inserted for ‘deep’ and ‘wide.’ When I look back to those childhood Vacation Bible School experiences I think the reason I loved the song so much was because every year on closing night, all the kids would get up in front of the church and sing the song with our little hand motions. By the fourth time around, we were humming the entire song and simply moving our arms and hands getting farther and farther apart. By the end of the song our arms were outstretched wide and so was the congregation’s. Perhaps our souls knew that sometimes there are not enough words to capture to depth and breadth of God’s love for us. It’s beyond our imagination and demands that we stretch beyond what we know, what we feel, and what we even believe.

I’ve heard such love described this way: “The love for equals is a human thing--of friend for friend, brother for brother. It is to love what is loving and lovely. The world smiles. The love for the less fortunate is a beautiful thing--the love for those who suffer, for those who are poor, the sick, the failures, the unlovely. This is compassion, and it touches the heart of the world. The love for the more fortunate is a rare thing--to love those who succeed where we fail, to rejoice without envy with those who rejoice, the love of the poor for the rich, of the black man for the white man. The world is always bewildered by its saints. And then there is the love for the enemy--the love for the one who does not love you but mocks, threatens, and inflicts pain. The torture’s love for the torturer. This is God’s love. It conquers the world.”<sup>1</sup>

It is my prayer that you won’t just guess or imagine such a depth of grace, but you will receive it--seek it out and place your life into it. And having done so, may you be confident and free enough to share it with a world deeply in need of such redemption.

Deep and wide, deep and wide, there’s a fountain flowing deep and wide, we used to sing as children. Indeed, this love, this mercy is so deep and so wide that even the crumbs scattered under the table will find you. *Amen.*

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat* (New York: Harper Collins, 1966), 105-6.