

The Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost
Prov. 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23; James 2:1-10, 14-17; Mark 7:24-37

Humble Access*

The Rev'd Dr. Patrick S. Cheng
Church of the Transfiguration
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As some of you know, Michael and I have a six-year-old Bichon Frise. Are any of you familiar with this kind of dog breed? Well, Bichons are white, fluffy, and notoriously sweet and cuddly. Our dog's name is Chartres, and she's named after the famous medieval French cathedral outside of Paris.

(I'm also named after a cathedral, but one that's a lot closer: St. Patrick's right here in Manhattan.)

Every night, when Michael and I sit down for dinner, Chartres hops onto a hassock, and she waits patiently for us to finish before she gets her dinner. Sometimes, however, when we have a particularly tasty meal – say, roast chicken or grilled burgers – Chartres will jump off her hassock and slowly make her way under the table.

She'll sit there quietly in the event that some morsel might, by the grace of God, fall off the table. Now she's not begging for food – we've trained her well, and we never feed her from our plates. But she is in a position of humble access. She doesn't expect to be fed as a matter of right, but only as a matter of gift or grace.

The theme of humble access is central to today's Gospel passage from Mark about the Syro-Phoenician woman, which also happens to be one of my favorite passages in the Bible.

First, this is the only story in the New Testament that references a domesticated or house dog, or *kynarion* in the Greek. The word *kynarion* is the diminutive form of the Greek word for dog (that is, *kyon*), and thus has a sweet or affectionate connotation to it, like “puppy” or “doggie.” So Chartres' cuddly canine ancestors are in the Bible!

Second, this is the only time in the New Testament that Jesus is out-argued. (I like that, as someone who was trained as a lawyer.) Remarkably for the time, it is a woman – and a Gentile no less – who stands up to Jesus, debates with him, and ultimately changes his mind.

In today's Gospel passage, the Syro-Phoenician woman approaches Jesus and begs him to cast a demon out of her daughter. Jesus was trying to get away from the crowds and didn't want anyone to know that he was in Gentile territory. So he is understandably a bit cranky. He tells her that “the children should be fed first,” and that it is “not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.”

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The woman doesn't miss a beat, however, and responds that "even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Jesus is impressed by her clever response and relents. As a result, the Syro-Phoenician woman's daughter is healed.

Now some of you – like me – might have been troubled initially by this passage, which appears to compare this woman and her people to animals. For many of us who are from historically marginalized groups, it's not uncommon to experience others treating us as if we are something less than human.

This underscores the recent call by our Presiding Bishop and the President of the House of Deputies to pray today for racial reconciliation and an end to racism, especially in solidarity with the African Methodist Episcopal Church. So today's gospel passage raises important issues about ethnic and racial identity, and how we treat the "Other."

What's important to note, however, is that Jesus is also making an analogy in today's Gospel passage to the Jews and the Gentiles.

That is, both groups are part of the household of God, but the Jews are the children. They come first, and they should be fed as a matter of inheritance. Gentiles, by contrast – including the Syro-Phoenicians – are more like the house pets. They are not part of the biological family, and they must wait before they are fed.

The Syro-Phoenician woman gets it. She doesn't expect to be fed as a matter of right, but she is willing to wait and be fed from the leftovers of the children. For her, being fed is a gift – that is, matter of grace – and her position of humble access is what ultimately makes Jesus relent.

One of my favorite things about the Rite I mass is the Prayer of Humble Access that we say every week right before we receive communion. The prayer, which was written by Thomas Cranmer himself, is over 450 years old and was included in the very first Book of Common Prayer in 1549.

Those of you who, like me, were raised Roman Catholic, are intimately familiar with the *Domine, Non Sum Dignus* prayer that is said immediately before communion: "Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed."

The Anglican version of this prayer – that is, the Prayer of Humble Access – references the exchange between Jesus and the Syro-Phoenician woman. Not only do we not presume to come to the Lord's table trusting in our own righteousness, but we are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under the table.

The Prayer of Humble Access reminds us beautifully that none of us has *earned* the right to receive the Bread of Heaven or the Cup of Salvation. That is, none of us *deserves* this sacrament. It is not something that can be bought, bartered, or inherited.

Rather, communion is a pure gift, an expression of God's loving-kindness towards us. No matter who we are, what families we come from, what we own, what we have done, or what we may have left undone: The Holy Eucharist is an act of unmerited grace by God, in Christ, and through the Spirit.

In that sense, the communion rail is a great leveler that lifts up the lowly and casts down the mighty. As we heard from today's Hebrew Bible reading from Proverbs, "The rich and poor have this in common: the Lord is the maker of them all."

And once we've experienced God's manifold and great mercies, we are strengthened to go out into the world and show the same loving-kindness to others.

This is what James means in today's epistle reading when he writes that faith without works is dead. Having been on the receiving end of God's mercy ourselves, we are called to clothe the naked and to feed the hungry, and to treat those with dirty clothes no differently than those with "gold rings and fine clothes."

And this also happens to be our church's motto, *Fides Opera*, which you see on the sign at the entrance to the garden, and which is Latin for "Faith and Works" or "Faith in Action."

On this Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, I invite you to reflect upon the grace and gift of the Holy Eucharist. As we heard in the Collect of the Day, God will resist the proud and those who confide in their own strength. But God will never abandon those who boast of God's mercy.

Like the Syro-Phoenician woman, may we approach the Lord's table with humble access, today and always.