

There IS a plan!

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32 Matthew 15:21-28

Let me start by saying, God is on a mission. God has a plan. We have to start there if anything else in our world or in our faith is going to make any sense whatsoever.

Let's face it; if we are to try and make sense out of the world otherwise, we simply never will. Whether it's the elections in Kenya and the controversy as to whether those results will be accepted or the ongoing confrontations between left and newly emboldened right in the US, things don't look all that great. I can't tell you how ashamed of my country I feel now that one of the protest leaders has come out in celebration about the death of the young woman who was struck by a car last weekend. And he calls himself a Christian.

We worry about wars and potentials for war. We see terrorism in foreign countries and in our home countries. One country can't decide how to get out of the EU, another wants in. We don't know where to start with the on-going refugee crisis and as a result there is a strong temptation to dehumanize "them" as being "them" ... which is different than (and less than) being "us".

In the midst of confusion and confrontation the temptation is to get more angry, to hold on tighter to "what's yours", to view others, the different, the not-like-me with suspicion. Look out for yourself and let everyone else take a flying leap!

That's the spirit.

Well, no, not actually, that ISN'T the spirit! But it's nothing new. Bigotry, small-mindedness, prejudice, they have been around for a LONG time.

Matthew knew all about that when he wrote the shocking story that we heard read to us a few minutes ago. He records what are perhaps the most troubling and puzzling things we overhear Jesus say in all of the Gospels.

You heard it: "It's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs".

Now no matter what we know about the Canaanites or about what has happened to Jesus previously in this Gospel, the sting of Jesus' comment to the woman is very real. We expect something like that from the disciples, after all, she is a loser. Sad!

Be very clear about this, the woman knows EXACTLY who she is and how these Jews feel about her: she is a woman approaching a Jew, approaching a group of men in a gender separated society, an outsider, a pagan, and someone with trouble in her own family. There are plenty of reasons for her to be excluded from the crowd that Jesus is talking to.

And this is ABSOLUTELY CRITICAL: In the world of Matthew the fledgling church is trying to decide who is in, who is out. It's far too easy to hear this story as another healing story and move on. But it is so much more.

In the ancient Near East dogs were not the fluffy poodles or handsome shepherds we have as pets today. Dogs had a job to do in the tribes and towns and villages. Dogs ate the filth. They were the garbage collectors. You allowed them around because you needed them but you certainly didn't feed them or touch them or care for them. Dogs were on their own.

And Jesus calls this woman a dog. (I can almost hear some of the more conservative Jews in His audience saying, "about time!")

The woman, for her part, does not try to deny to Jesus that she is in exactly the position she is in. She knows who she is, and she knows that to the disciples and anyone else standing around, she is the dog in that situation. And Jesus has just "dissed" her!

Can Jesus really be saying no to this poor woman who has asked for healing, not even for herself but for her daughter? Is He saying that God's mercy and love are only for a particular people? It's easy to get seduced to the falsehood that somehow love is scarce, that resources are limited, that giving somehow diminishes us.

The great thing about this Canaanite woman is that she seems unfazed by everything working against her and quips back, "Yes, but even the dogs under the table deserve the crumbs." If you wonder why Jesus didn't just end this, but instead is dragging it out...it's a teachable moment for the disciples.

The woman gets it, she understands the power of God's Grace, for she believes so much that she knows a crumb from Jesus will suffice. And imagine, she isn't even on the church membership rolls!

This is the ONLY place in the Gospels where I can find someone winning a theological argument with Jesus!

Of course, he may have LET her win, both because of what she represented and as a means of instruction to the disciples. After all, He tied the wisest scholars in knots, but not this woman.

Maybe that is exactly what Jesus wants her to do. If He had just healed her daughter at her request, the disciples would probably have been appalled and missed the point. But engage a bright, quick witted woman, (a Canaanite at that!); it's much more dramatic to lose a theological argument with a woman and then heal her daughter.

This unnamed woman gives us a wonderful example of how to approach God with both humility and boldness, a grounded trust in God's grace, despite all the human obstacles that stand in the way of relationship.

A grounded trust in God's grace. There's no two ways around it; God has a plan and we get a glimpse of it in God's grace.

God has as plan. Now we can do our best to screw it up, but God works through it all. This is Paul's message to the Romans today and it helps us make sense of both Matthew's story and have a bit of insight into our lives.

God calls a people and chooses them. They are disobedient and God saves them anyway. Sound familiar?

God gives the law, the judges and the prophets and knows the people will disobey.

God sends the Christ, the rock of salvation. The people reject Jesus, and this, even this, God uses so that Gentiles may be grafted into the plan of God for salvation.

No question: God has a purpose and a plan. God is in control.

Throughout the letter to Romans we've seen how God repairs brokenness in our own souls through grace and unwavering, inseparable love. We've seen how God overcomes the brokenness in human relations, uniting us in Christ as chosen, beloved children. God's plan is restoration and wholeness. Paul trusts in this as he works through all the frustrating divisions between Jews and gentiles, the law and God's grace and paints a picture of welcome and chosenness.

To Paul's way of thinking, the rebellion of all creation through history is accepted by God so that God might show mercy to all. No dogs under the table here! Everyone, everyone has a place at the table!

God uses the salvation of the gentiles to inspire jealousy in the hearts of the chosen ones, Paul says. See the mercy of our God and how it extends to all people? Even THIS is a part of the plan of God.

Now I know how terribly hard it can be to talk about God's plan or God being in control when we see so much brokenness in our world. If God is in control, why do people kill one another in the streets? Why do some have more than enough while others starve in poverty? Why do we lose people we love? Why is there so much grief?

But a better question might be; why do what we do?

God shows us how to love, yet too often we chose anger or hatred.

God shows us how to care, however the world shows us how to turn our backs.

God gives us courage, yet we are easily overcome with fear.

God affirms a promise, written in the flesh and blood of Jesus, however we still doubt.

God has called us to be stewards of this great creation yet we are more likely to trash than to preserve.

God calls upon us to love one another even as we love ourselves and far too often we neither love the others or show compassion for ourselves.

God is simple; we make our excuses complex.

We give up, God NEVER gives up:

There is always sustenance for the faithful. There is always plenty for those who believe. There is courage for the faint of heart, strength to do what is right for the weak, the power of love for those who face hate, the affirmation of the presence of Christ when doubts try to grow.

No, things are not perfect, far from it. But it's not God making our problems, we do a very good job of that on our own. However, there is ALWAYS hope.

The Canaanite woman understood: We don't need to worry about the banquet table being large enough or full enough... even the smallest crumb from our Lord is more than sufficient to heal and sustain us.

Yes, things can look pretty messed up. Yes, it's easy to drop our guard and become overwhelmed by the problems of the world around us.

But never forget, despite it all, God is still on a mission, working for all things for good. For healing. For restoration. This is called grace. This is God's plan and God's promise.