

Undeserving

“‘Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table’” *Matthew 15:27.*

Veruca Salt. Not a name you expected to hear this weekend. Veruca Salt. In the 1971 movie, *Willie Wonka & the Chocolate Factory*, she was one of the five lucky winners to tour the factory with Wonka. In the movie, she clearly demonstrated demanding entitlement willing to bulldoze anyone who got between her and what she wanted. The height of her selfish antics came in the scene where she meets these geese that lay solid chocolate eggs with a gold shell.

After seeing what these geese could do, Veruca wants one for herself. She can’t wait for one either. She wants one at that moment and so she breaks into song stating that she wants one now! Throughout the song, she goes on a tantrum wrecking everything in the room to heighten her demands. And for her big finale in that song, she stands up on a special machine designed to determine whether the eggs the geese lay are good or bad. As she hits and holds the final note of the song, she drops down the chute for the discarded eggs as the needle of the machine very clearly lands on the label, bad egg.

Yes, in the movie, Veruca was a bad egg. And if you’ve seen everything leading up to this scene or have a chance to check it out later, I think you’ll find yourself having no trouble declaring that Veruca was totally spoiled and rotten. She was, to put it bluntly, a brat, who needed to learn a lesson or two on what she should demand and expect. If we had to put a picture of someone who captures what it means to be undeserving, Veruca Salt would be an ideal candidate.

Staged movie scenes, like the one I just described, can make determining who is deserving or not seem so simple and clear. Stories like these, invite us to be that outside judge with the God’s eye view. And sometimes, we take those experiences and try to apply them directly to real life. When we do this, things often get more complicated than with the movie scene. In real life, we aren’t as removed or detached as with the movie and so our determination of deserving or undeserving becomes far more biased.

This struggle is important to admit as we consider the Gospel reading from Matthew this weekend. The reality is that in God’s eyes this account has two undeserving parties in it, the Canaanite woman and the disciples. They even serve as representatives of a larger comparison between Israelites, the disciples, and Gentiles, the Canaanite woman. Neither is worthy of God’s mercy. Both are sinful and without anything to offer God to somehow bribe Him to look upon them with favor.

What we witness in this account are two very different understandings of what it means to be undeserving. For the disciples and by extension for the Israelites the chosen status clouds the fact that they weren’t chosen by God for any reason except His undeserved love. Weeks ago, our weekend readings included a passage from Deuteronomy chapter seven where Moses reminds the people of Israel that their status before God rested on His promised love and not some quality from themselves.

Truly throughout His earthly ministry, Jesus was constantly met by this struggle. Especially with the religious leaders of the Israelites during His day, Jesus witnessed them in one way or another overlooking their undeserving nature before God and instead convincing themselves that they were deserving because of their biological relationship to Abraham. They rested their status before God on their historical heritage and not His gracious and loving promise.

Sadly, this notion had infected many of the people of Israel during Jesus’ earthly ministry, even His disciples wrestled with it. And now in this moment with the Canaanite woman, He begins to expose this issue. As Jesus encounters this woman from our text, He puts His disciples in a dilemma. His silence and her outbursts are something they can’t handle. They beg Jesus to get rid of her. They can’t take her ongoing cries directed to them.

Now the best way for Jesus to get rid of this woman, was to mercifully give her what she requested. Yet, this wouldn’t be proper according to the thinking of that day. So, Jesus forced His disciples to wrestle with this tension of what they were asking, saying, **“I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”** (*Matthew 15:24*) If Jesus heeded their request, they were asking him to treat this foreign female who likely was ceremonially unclean from her contact with her demon-possessed daughter on the same level as them. Or perhaps to put it more personally, they were admitting that they were just as undeserving of God’s mercy as she was.

This moment and the many moments prior to this in Jesus’ ministry that the disciples witnessed were leading to this defining moment. The reality that Jesus was truly sent to the lost sheep of Israel wasn’t a matter of status or deservedness. It was simply the order that God had established in His promise to Abraham years ago. He

blessed Abraham so that he might be a blessing to others. And now faced with this Gentile woman, the disciples were having to recognize theirs and others improper understanding of God's promise. Something that would completely change as they would eventually become God's messengers to all nations.

The other side of the undeserving coin focuses us on the Canaanite woman. Yes, she too was undeserving, not because she was foreigner or a woman or connected to demon possession, but because she too was a sinner. And her need as great as it was, and as much as our hearts might ache for her, didn't somehow make her more deserving. And she knew this and more amazingly she acknowledged as much to Jesus.

From her undignified begging to her posture of humiliation, we begin to see a woman who knows what she needs, who knows who can meet that need, and who isn't deterred by how undeserving she really is. And it's Jesus' conversation with her that makes this clear. As off-putting and challenging as His words to her seem to us, she doesn't receive them that way and instead it's the Lord's words that pull from her a true confession of her undeserving state.

“It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs” (*Matthew 15:26*) says Jesus. And she agrees with Him in her response! **“Yes, Lord ...”** (*Matthew 15:27*) And instead of trying to make her case by justifying herself, she makes her case by recognizing that master's abundant mercy, **“... yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.”** (*Matthew 15:27*) This woman not only confesses her undeserving state and her understanding of the order of salvation (to the Jews first and then the Gentiles [Romans 1:16]) but she also demonstrates trust in the master to be merciful to all in the household. And by God's grace, she trusts Jesus to be merciful to her even if it's just the crumbs of His mercy.

Both undeserving cases, the disciples and the Canaanite woman, should connect with us. There are times when like the disciples we want God to just deal with others, others who are bothering us and it'd be easiest if God just moved them along. As we beg Him to take care of the annoyance, we overlook our ongoing undeserving state maybe because we're ignorant of where we truly stand or perhaps it's because we're in denial of our actual state. Either way, we demand from God forgetting that He truly isn't a prisoner of our expectations.

There are other times when like the Canaanite woman we begin to acknowledge our undeserving state before God but before we are willing to accept the truth that His Word reveals we want to qualify our situation. Our response starts like the woman's but then veers off toward self-justification, yes, Lord, but I'm not as bad as this other situation; or yes, Lord, but here's how I'll make it up to You. And either way, instead of resting back on the undeserved mercy of the master we try to continue to cling to the false hope that the merit of our own sinful methods will somehow, someday become deserving in God's eyes.

Truly, God has given all to disobedience so that He might have mercy on all. And His mercy is never deserved. It's always undeserved. There's no quality or characteristic that we can display and no work that we can do that earns the mercy we need and desire from God, even just the crumbs of His mercy. His mercy that is more than our sin is ours because Jesus took on what we truly deserve. Crucified, died, and buried for your sake and mine, Jesus endured the shame and punishment we earned and in a merciful exchange He extended to us the forgiveness, salvation, and life eternal He had earned and deserved.

Undeserving, that's what we are. And this isn't a put down or an unhealthy focus on the negative, no this is an honest confession of what God has made clear to us in His Word. We have no claim on His mercy and yet, like the Canaanite woman, we trust our God to be merciful because of who He is not who we are. We are beggars seeking for God to send us away with even the crumbs of His mercy because even that much mercy is truly satisfying. And again, even in this service, through Word and Sacrament, our God delivers what we desire.

It's this humble truth that drives our interactions with those around us, especially those new to this faith community. While we want our church family to be warm and welcoming, the motivation for this isn't just so guests and visitors have a good time. There's more behind the warmth and welcoming! The reason we desire to invite and include, the reason we mention our expectation of guests and visitors week in and week out, the reason we want to be hospitable making sure people have a place to sit and know where to find things is because we know that every person that enters through these church doors is as undeserving and in need of the crumbs of Jesus' abundant mercy as we are. And this humble truth is what keeps us begging the Lord to continue to do His merciful work among us this day and every day. Have mercy on us, O Lord, Son of David. Amen.

In Christ,

Pastor Dan