

Crumbs Under the Table
(Matthew 15:21-28)

There were rumblings that the restless ghost of Walt Whitman had been spotted drifting around Widener Library on the campus of Harvard University. The apparition was, in fact, not an apparition at all. It was one Simon Wilder, a most resourceful homeless man.

It was a tribute to his sheer cleverness that he had been able to succeed in taking up residence in the basement of Widener Library. Now Simon was no intellectual. But he was an avaricious reader – a lover of literature. So the Widener Library basement offered not only the warmth of its many boilers but also provided an unending supply of books from Augustine to Zola.

But Simon's good fortune was abruptly upended as his literary residence was discovered by Harvard student, Monty Kessler. Monty was searching for his lost senior thesis that had errantly and providentially fallen into the hands of Simon. Being resourceful Simon was holding the scholarly work hostage. So out of frustration Monty ratted on Simon and he was soon back on the streets – but not before spending a night in jail for trespassing and public drunkenness.

In an effort to retrieve his hostage thesis, Monty bailed Simon out of jail and took him home. There Simon was allowed to stay in a broken down van outside the house where Monty and his three roommates lived. Here was the deal Simon offered. Monty got one page of thesis for each night of lodging.

Extra pages could be earned in exchange for amenities such as a hot meal, a bath, or a warm blanket. Even more pages would be returned for a room inside the house.

Now Simon was pretty much a stereotypical homeless guy. He dressed in tattered layers, was in dire need of a hair cut, and owned nothing save for Monty's thesis. Simon also had a rather unpleasant odor about him that frequently resembled the cheap wine he drank when ever he had a couple of bucks.

This is how the movie *With Honors* begins. The film stars Joe Pesci as the homeless Simon B. Wilder who is dieing from Asbestosis – a condition that was a consequence of his years in the Merchant Marine. In this beginning chapter there is a very compelling scene where Monty confronts Simon about his thesis. Here's their brief conversation.

Simon says, "What do see when you look at me? What do you see?" "A man." replies Monty. "No, you see [an animal]." "I see a man who needs a home," says Monte. To which Simon replies, "I had a home. I had a warm place to sleep with seventeen bathrooms and eight miles of books. I had a palace. You know why I need a home? 'Cause a you. 'Cause when you looked at me you didn't see a man." What do you see when you look upon the marginalized of the world. Please pray with me.

Gracious and loving God, lift up
our hearts this morning to your

creation. Open our hearts and minds to the scripture read and the world proclaimed. Make my words your words. Enlighten us to see all your people as people of worth. Through Christ Jesus we pray. Amen.

The movie *With Honors* is one of my favorite contemporary films. It is a classical study in the way the privileged of our world view the rest of society. Whether we are ill-willed or well-intended, the truth is ten percent of the world's population enjoys a privileged life style compared to the other ninety percent. And those ten percent consume eighty percent of the earth's natural resources.

Jesus understood this phenomenon in the first century Mediterranean culture. He framed much of his ministry around that "other" ninety percent. He also focused his ministry on transforming the privileged ten percent. Today, the theological term for this phenomenon is the "preferential option of the poor." Simply put the "preferential option of the poor" means that a majority of the world lives in poverty and their view of the world reflects the reality of the world. Jesus spoke to the preferential option of the poor throughout all his ministry.

The passage from Matthew we heard this morning is one of my favorite scriptures. I have often referred to this scripture as the turning point in Jesus' his ministry. The Gentile woman opened his eyes to the preferential option of the poor. When she asked Jesus to heal her daughter, Jesus said to the woman, "I was sent only to help the people of Israel – God's lost sheep – not the Gentiles."

At this point in his ministry, Jesus was like Monty Kessler. When he looked at the Gentile woman he didn't see a person. He saw a stranger from a strange land – something less than the Jewish ideal of a civilized human being. And the disciples share this same view with Jesus. They were quick to urge Jesus to send her away. "Tell her to leave," they said. "She is bothering us with all her begging."

But the woman was persistent. She debated with Jesus. She challenged his very understanding of his own ministry. She came and worshiped him and pleaded again, "Lord, help me!" And Jesus argued with her, "It isn't right to take food from the children and throw it to the dogs." "Yes, Lord," she replied, "but even dogs are permitted to eat the crumbs that fall beneath their master's table."

It was precisely at this time when Jesus' ministry took a dramatic turn. He chose to heal the Gentile woman's daughter. He realized then that God had sent him for the entire world, not just for the children of Israel. This passage communicates the universal ideology that Jesus came to save the world – not just the Israelites. Jesus came for the ninety percent as well as for the ten percent. This is the beginning of Christianity as we know it today.

This is the beginning of Jesus' preferential option of the poor. Unfortunately, we have failed to understand the profound nature of Jesus' revelation in his confrontation with the Gentile woman. How we see the other ninety percent is important to understanding the ministry of Jesus Christ. How we view the homeless, the stranger, the immigrant, the foreigner,

the non-Christian determines the way we see our ministry today.

The gospel reading this morning encourages us to better understand the preferential option of the poor. Jesus' encounter with the Gentile woman encourages us to begin to realize that the other ninety percent should receive more than the crumbs that fall under the table. Jesus' treatment of the Gentile woman is meant to transform our view of the world just as it transformed his view of the world.

But the pressures of contemporary society make it difficult for us to be transformed. Today our culture has become one of "entitlement." Who we are and where we live affects our view of the world. Who we are and where we live affects that ninety percent that represents the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized.

Because of who we are and where we live we have come to believe that we are entitled to sit at the table, allowing that other ninety percent to subsist on the crumbs that fall under our table. Now, entitlement is not only a secular ideology. It has also affected the church.

Pastors who have "paid their dues" feel entitled to that big, prestigious plum of an appointment. Congregations feel entitled to that highly regarded and effective pastor to lead them. The entitlement mentality is arguably the number one reason the United Methodist Church is losing members. It has caused us to be satisfied with dropping crumbs under our table for the rest of the world to scrounge around for.

Wesley's founding ideology was for the church to be rooted in the marginalized of society – the poor, the prisoner, the oppressed. The People called Methodist lived, worked, and

preached, among and ministered to those marginalized souls. But somewhere over time we became an upper middle class church. It became easier to simply write the check than to be among the marginalized.

But the real problem with the entitlement mentality is that it flies in the face of God's grace. It contradicts the Christ's gracious offer of eternal life – our salvation. God's grace is freely given, with no strings attached. We can never earn God's grace and will never deserve it. In fact, if we got what we deserved we wouldn't like what we got.

Simply said, we are not entitled to God's grace. God blesses us out of God's unconditional love for us. And in the balance, God calls us to not be satisfied with giving what is left over – with dropping our crumbs under the table for the marginalized of the world to eat.

contemplate the way you see the marginalized of the world. Do you see men and women? Or do you see animals? Do you see people who feel welcome to sit at your table? Or do you see dogs licking up crumbs under your table? What is your view of the world?