

Last Wednesday my family was having dinner, sharing some highs and lows from the week so far, when an exasperated Sarah shared this: “Ughh! Guess what I found in the garden today!” “Um, I don’t know; a dead squirrel?” “No! More zucchini!” “But... didn’t you plant zucchini?” “Yes, of course I did. But now I have more than I want, more than I need, more than I know what to do with!”

Hashtag: First World Problem? Well, maybe and maybe not.

Some of you may not be familiar with this particular hashtag—it is usually attached after someone comments about something they found annoying or inconvenient, often as a way to admit that in the larger scheme of things this is not really a problem. Slow Wi-Fi, too many dinner choices, school choices, new car choices, nowhere to charge your Apple Watch in the airport lounge, always getting in the slow lane at the well-stocked grocery store, too much traffic on the road to your cabin, not seeing Ironman 2 before Ironman 3 comes out, that kind of thing. If the person adds the hashtag themselves, it’s usually a sign of self-awareness—I know this isn’t that big of a deal, but it’s bumming me out right now. If someone else adds it as a response, well, that could be a not-so-subtle reminder to count your blessings, to see the glass as half-full, not half-empty, or simply to remember that some people face much more serious troubles in life.

So, yes, in that sense of it, Sarah’s concern that we had too much zucchini in our garden fits that sort of first world problem. In many ways, it’s the shadow side of abundance, the problem of plenty, we might say. We are not alone, certainly not in this country and other relatively affluent countries in the West and North in facing how best to manage our abundance—or even more crassly, what to do with our leftovers, with the crumbs that fall from our tables.

That’s the image that this Syro-Phoenician woman uses in her discussion with Jesus. As she tries to convince him to heal her daughter, to use the gifts and the power that is available to him, she suggests that even a little of what he has to offer would be more than enough. Like another woman in the gospel, who believed that simply touching Jesus’ garment would bring her healing, this woman has faith that Jesus is more than able to provide the healing she needs. She continues to be convinced of this, even after Jesus’ own rather brusque and very insensitive name-calling—remember, he sort of calls her a dog in this exchange—but even so, she is content to receive his leftovers. Her faith—actually, what the text says is her words, her LOGIC as much as her faith—it sways Jesus, too. It’s like he catches himself in his human, cultural biases against her. He realizes that not only is she worthy of crumbs from his table, Jesus now *comes to believe* that she is worthy of so much more. And so he heals her daughter, and at the same time, he lays the foundation for what would become his ever-expanding mission. Yes, he himself has said that his ministry is to the Children of Israel, but here we start to see Jesus expand his horizons, an expansion that will simply explode exponentially in the mission of the early church, carrying the gospel to the ends of the earth.

What this woman helps Jesus to see—even sort of shocks him into seeing—is how Jesus was allowing his own cultural biases—his own sense of who is “in” and who is “out” to color the way that he engaged in his ministry. She helps him—and in turn helps all of us—see beyond the rather artificial lines we draw between us and them.

This is where it seems like our two readings—from Mark and James come together, in the ideas of breaking down the barriers between us and them, of putting our faith into action, and of moving beyond simply offering our leftovers—the crumbs from our tables—to intentionally serving the other in need.

As Pastor Hannah point out last week, since the days of Martin Luther there has been some controversy about how best to use James, with its emphasis on faith in action, or its statements like the one we heard to day “Faith without works is dead.” Throughout the book of James, the author is very concerned with whether we Christians are using our religion to serve the very real problems, concerns, and needs of the world around us, or whether we are content to keep it in a level of talk: of church-speak. As one commentator put it, James’s overall point is that faith in God involves more than simply affirming theological formulas or rehashing religious pronouncements. Rather, faith involves a thorough *reorientation* of one’s life. A reorientation not unlike the one Jesus made when confronted with the woman’s words, which in turn called into question his own favoritism. Faith makes a difference in *us*. More importantly, faith makes a difference in our relations with our sisters and brothers.<sup>1</sup>

Putting faith in action means being intentional about not just giving lip-service to our faith, but putting feet to it—walking the talk, as Pr Hannah said last week. James’ example of religious faith not backed up by any corresponding action is that of someone being confronted with a hungry person and saying to them, “God bless you. Be filled. Hunger no more,” without actually giving the person anything to eat. Or running into someone who lacked a decent place to sleep and simply saying, “Go in peace, stay warm and dry. God is with you. Have a nice day!” rather than doing whatever is in our power to actually shelter a person. The list goes on and on—and in fact a good portion of the book of James has to do with that disconnect between faith and action.

About ten years ago, the band U2 wrote a song that combined these ideas: James’ theme of religious talk without action and Mark’s image of the woman asking for the crumbs that fell from Jesus’s table. The song has this refrain

You speak of signs and wonders / I need something other  
I would believe if I was able / But I’m waiting for the crumbs from your table.

So how do we move from simply offering the crumbs that fall from our table, to intentionally offering ourselves to others, making room for them at the table? What might it look like to move beyond pious platitudes, to walk the talk, make a budget line for our compassion right off the top and not simply from what is leftover at the end of the month, the end of the year, the end of our life? In other words, what might that kind of faith in

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<sup>1</sup> A.K.M. Adam, Oxford University, cited in [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org), accessed September 5, 2015.

action look like?

Maybe it looks like this: a congregation I know who had a decades long tradition of holding a rummage sale to raise funds for many different things, including youth camp scholarships. One year, though, it might have been of the congregation's big anniversary years, they decided they'd give it all away—to mission and outreach, locally and globally, things they've supported for years, things they had always wanted to donate to but didn't think they had the means. That year, sales doubled from where they had been the previous year. 10s of thousands of dollars passing right on through the church's account to needs out there among their neighbors. Hashtag first world problem? No, more like hashtag blessed to be a blessing.

Or maybe it looks like this: Eli Burton, a boy from our Christ the King family wondered how he could help the people he saw begging on street corners and on-ramps. What do they need? Food, water, maybe some new, clean, dry socks and a few other things, not leftovers, not throwaways, but new things, wrapped up in a new bandana. Suddenly Eli packs were born, and kids at servant camp set out to put them together, just to have them on hand when the need presented itself. Hashtag first world problem? No, how about hashtag how can I help.

Or, it might look like this: when European nations were deciding how each of them would respond to the migrant and refugee crisis currently facing them, Iceland's government said they could accommodate about fifty refugees. Fifty. 5-0. But when children's book author Bryndís Björgvinsdóttir launched a campaign to see who among her compatriots would open their home to refugees, more than 10,000 came forward in less than 24 hours. Hashtag first world problem? How about hashtag the Kingdom of God is like.

The kingdom of God is like a sower, Jesus said way back in the early chapters of Mark, like a sower who went to sow some seed. Some fell on rocky ground, some got trampled underfoot, some got choked out by weeds, but some fell on good soil.

But maybe we don't always know which soil will be that good soil. Maybe we are just surprised—surprised and even frustrated and annoyed—when the growth seems to be happening somewhere, in someone that we didn't expect, that we had maybe even counted out long ago. Maybe that's what happened with this woman, the one who's faith and reason helped open Jesus eyes and broaden his mission. Maybe her heart was good soil—surprisingly capable of unexpected growth.

“But, Lord, didn't you plant those seeds?” “Yes, of course I did. I just didn't expect them to take root where they did. I didn't expect them to produce this kind of growth where they were planted.” Can we, like Jesus, allow ourselves to be open to new possibilities this unexpected growth brings, to be surprised and change by the faith and reason of others, even to be transformed in the very core of our mission by the sheer audacity of their being here among us?

Hashtag faith in action. Thanks be to God.