

Title: “Beyond the Table”

Chris Ryan

Matt. 15:21–28

8/16/2026

Service Readings: Isaiah 56:1, 6–8; Rom. 11:1–2a, 13–15, 28–32; Matt. 15:21–28

The mercies of Jesus reach beyond the expected boundaries and to the entire world.

Message:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

In my dining room is a table that Kim and I bought nearly 25 years ago. Around that table we’ve celebrated birthdays, shared meals, prayed together, and welcomed guests. That table answers a question: Who... belongs? Here, in this Sanctuary is another table. And it too answers the same question.

Who belongs around the table in my home, in our Sanctuary, in an office conference room? Who.... Belongs?

In our Gospel passage, Jesus is confronted by a woman and the image of a table is invoked and the question is asked: who belongs at the table of the Lord? And the answer Jesus appears to give is one that surprises everyone. You see, the interaction between this woman and Jesus is not just about one Gentile woman. It is really about the kind of Church that Jesus is creating. Listen again to this passage:

²¹ Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. ²² A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly.”

²³ Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, “Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us.”

²⁴ He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.”

²⁵ The woman came and knelt before him. “Lord, help me!” she said.

²⁶ He replied, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.”

²⁷ “Yes it is, Lord,” she said. “Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.”

²⁸ Then Jesus said to her, “Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.” And her daughter was healed at that moment.

This woman was a Canaanite. She had no claim to sit at the table with Jesus. She had no claim to be included in the kingdom he was ushering in. Yet she calls out, “Son of David.” And she is met – with silence. The disciples want to send her away, but she refuses to leave. Why? Because her faith was not anchored in herself – it was anchored in Jesus’ mercy. She knows that even though she doesn’t belong at the table, the mercy of Christ will extend beyond it to her.

How often do we act like the disciples? How often do we look around our own tables of fellowship and quietly think, “they don’t fit,” or “they are too different from us?” We act as judge and determine who belongs and who doesn’t. For the disciples, as they pondered these questions, what does Jesus do? He allows the tension to expose what is in their hearts before revealing the wideness of his mercy. He doesn’t cast her away, he welcomes her. She has nothing to offer Jesus except a desperate confidence that he is merciful. Jesus does not reward her persistence. He reveals that his mercy is greater than anyone expected.

Notice, also, what Jesus is doing in this interaction. He is using it as a teaching moment for his disciples. He is teaching them, forming them. He is showing that Jesus came, not just for the Jews but for all people, this woman, and you, and me, included.

And, not only are we like the disciples, watching this woman and Jesus interact, We are also this woman. We were outsiders. Most of us had no claim. Yet Christ welcomed us, through baptism and through his Word.

You see, one thing that Jesus is teaching us is that the church is not a building, nor is it a bunch of ministries. The Church is us – Christians who are gathered around God’s Word and Sacraments. We had no claim to Christ’s table, but through his sacrificial death, and because of his resurrection, God has adopted us into his family so that we can now say we belong. And where does Christ continue to welcome us? Right here. At his table. Not because we earned a place, not because we have become worthy. But because he still gives his body and blood for sinners. Every time we come to this altar we are confessing exactly what the Canaanite woman confessed: “Lord, I have nothing to offer you but my need.” And every Sunday Christ answers exactly as he answered her: “My mercy is for you.”

These past three weeks we have explored what it means to fulfill Christ’s mission to make disciples. We have seen through Scripture how God calls us into relationship with himself. We have heard how God gathers his Church around Word and around his body and blood – to offer forgiveness and blessing. And today we consider how Christ gathers us together so that he can then send us out into the world. But here’s the thing: all of these are important. The Church doesn’t gather *instead* of going, nor does the Church *go* instead of gathering. Christ gathers his people around his gifts, forms them into his disciples, and then sends them out into the world so that others may also be gathered around him.

Christ gathers. Christ forgives. Christ feeds. Christ forms. Christ sends.

Throughout the history of the church there has always been a temptation to separate what Jesus has joined together. Every congregation faces this temptation. Some become so concerned with preserving themselves that they forget why Christ gathered them in the first place. Others become so busy trying to reach the world that they neglect the very gifts Christ has given to sustain his people. Jesus does neither. He gathers. He teaches. He feeds. He sends.

Imagine for just a moment a doctor telling you that your lungs are spending too much time breathing in. That they should only breathe out. That would sound ridiculous! Because everyone knows that life requires both inward and outward breath. Breath in. Breath out. Live. Breathing *in* isn’t selfish, it’s what makes breathing *out* even possible. The Church is similar: receive; give; gather; go. You see? The Church does not gather instead of go, nor does it go instead of gather. It follows the pattern that Jesus set: He gathers us around his gifts, forms us, and then sends us out into the world.

This is why our August series and events matter. We have been asking how we grow upward, how we grow deeper, and how we reach further. But these are not competing priorities. They belong together. Every ministry at St. Mark should answer this question: Does this ministry help people remain centered on Christ? If so, it belongs. Education. Trustees. Music. Outreach. Stewardship. Council. Everything.

Our ministry fair, then, is not about celebrating ourselves. It is about helping God's people discover how Christ is forming them to serve both within his Church and in their daily vocations. Just like maintaining the building isn't an end in itself, it serves the place where Christ gathers his people around Word and Sacraments. Caring for that space isn't competing with outward mission, it's caring for one of the ordinary ways that Christ carries out his mission.

Back to the table. The woman thought she was asking for crumbs, but what she received instead was Christ's mercy. And every Sunday, so do we. Christ gathers us. Christ forgives us. Christ feeds us. Christ forms us. And then he sends us. "Go in peace." That isn't the end of worship, it's the beginning of the Church's life in the world. Tomorrow Christ will already be in your workplace. He will already be in your neighborhood. He will already be in your family. And he sends you there, not to bring him where he is absent but to bear witness to the mercy you have already received.

The Church reaches beyond the table, but does so only because the Church has first been gathered around it.

Please pray with me.

Gracious Father, we thank You for gathering us around Your Son through Your holy Word and Sacraments. Though we had no claim upon Your mercy, You have welcomed us into Your family through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Continue to form us by Your Spirit, strengthen us in faith, and send us into our homes, workplaces, neighborhoods, and community as faithful witnesses to Your love. Keep St. Mark centered on Christ, so that all we do may proclaim His mercy and draw others to His table. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.