



THE WORK OF IMAGINATION

Devotional



We gathered on the hill just outside the fence that kept the federal prison separated from the rest of the world. It was a tall chain-link fence, so we could easily see the prison itself—a white building, many windows, and occasionally, a few people walking the grounds together. But the fence was electrified, topped with massive coils of barbed wire, so though the grounds were visible, they were threateningly inaccessible.

We gathered because more than 100 asylum seekers had been detained at that prison and were being held unjustly. We gathered—Christians and Jews and Sikhs—to sing and pray and read scripture, and we did it there, hoping both the asylum seekers and the jailers might be able to hear us. They would at least be able to see us. And we hoped our presence might give them some hope.

We did this every Sunday afternoon, week after week, that summer. It began as a small gathering, but it grew, and by the third or fourth week, people were driving from several hours away to be present. They wore jeans and t-shirts, robes and stoles, turbans and taqiyahs, kippahs and tallitot. They brought lawn chairs and blankets, water bottles and snacks, bells and guitars and drums, heartbreak and openness of spirit.

The Christians and Jews came to that first vigil with prayers and songs, stories about loving the neighbor, welcoming the stranger, remembering when we ourselves were strangers. The Sikhs were mostly silent partners through the service. But at the end, as we exchanged names and well wishes, preparing to go our own ways, we turned toward the parking lot and saw their extraordinarily generous contribution. While the rest of us had our gazes focused on the federal building and our ears tuned to the presenters, more members of the Sikh community had shown up, set up tables, laid large trays of food on them, and prepared to welcome us when the liturgy ended. They'd brought plates and silverware, cups and water, and trays filled to the brim with rice, curries, and samosas.

The Sikhs beckoned us to come and feast. As Christians and Jews made their way through the line, stumbling and sputtering thanks for this unexpected abundance, they laughed. "Oh, this?" they said, spooning curry onto our plates. "This is easy! You bring the prayers and the songs, and we will bring the food. This is what we do."

It wasn't all they did. In the weeks that followed, they would also bring prayers and songs for the vigils. They would bring the language skills needed to communicate with many of the asylum seekers inside the prison. They would bring lawyers willing to take on their cases. And they would keep bringing food. Each Sunday, as the services on the hill drew to a close, some would scurry off to set up tables, to pull trays of chapati and fruit and korma, always insisting it was nothing, always denying the time and energy and cost they must've put in to nourish the crowd so well and so often.

The prayers and songs helped us all recognize the beauty in each other's traditions. They taught us the themes our holy stories hold in common. But the food after the vigils was where the real connection began. It was where the Christians and Jews learned about the Sikhs' relationships to the asylum seekers, and their lived experience in our community. It was where we began strategizing about what we could do beyond those gatherings: set appointments with lawyers; communicate with families; coordinate transportation upon the detainees' eventual release. The meals—like Christian communion—drew us together, nourished us, and strengthened us for the work to be done when we were sent out again. Without the abundance laid before us by folks with the most reason to feel like outsiders, our prayers and songs might never have turned to action.

When the Canaanite woman hears Jesus mention a meal—even though the words he uses imply scarcity and boundaries—her own theological imagination is ignited. Jewish tradition is filled with meals as revelations of provision and abundance: manna from heaven; the table set in the presence of one's enemies; the vision Isaiah foretold of a banquet with rich foods and flowing drinks. Right before this, Jesus fed crowds with what looked like it would never be enough food, and his disciples collected baskets of leftovers!

This mother may be outside the tradition, but her reply to Jesus reveals her trust in God's mercy for her, for her daughter, for all who find themselves without a seat at the table, but hungry nonetheless. There is more than enough, she tells him. Her position far from the table lets her see how very full it is, and for this moment, she becomes the host, beckoning Jesus to recognize the abundance laid before us all.

Reflection Questions

1. How does the Jesus presented in this story sound like, or not like, the Jesus you know from other stories?
2. Did you notice the shift in the woman's approach to Jesus? She begins by asking for what she and her daughter need, then moves to declaring the abundance of what God gives. Why do you think she does that?
3. Where are you tempted to see, appreciate, or enforce limits, boundaries, and exclusions? How do those serve you?
4. Has an outsider ever expanded your view of a situation to which you were close? Reflect on that encounter.
5. Is there a situation in your life or community to which the Canaanite woman might have something to say? To what situation or struggle would you invite their boldness, their persistence, their imagination?