

BREAD!

A READERS THEATER BASED ON: THE CANAANITE/SYROPHOENICIAN WOMAN

MATTHEW 15:21-28/MARK 7:24-29¹

(1, 2 and 3 all have a music stand for their scripts and a folding chair to use when needed. The chairs are behind them, "at the ready." Begin with 1 center, 2 stage left and 3 stage right – all standing in a straight line, side by side, with their music stands in front of them.)

ALL: BREAD!

1: We find stories centered thematically around BREAD throughout the four Gospels.

2: 'Tell these stones to become BREAD.'

3: 'Give us our daily BREAD.'

1: 'We have here only five loaves of BREAD and two fish.'

2: 'Which of you, if your son asks for BREAD, will give him a stone?'

3: 'You of little faith, why are you talking among yourselves about having no BREAD?'

1: 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the BREADCRUMBS that fall from their masters' table.'

ALL (spoken randomly in a popcorn chorus): BREAD . . . BREAD . . . BREAD!

2: Is there enough bread for everyone?

3: Who is invited to the table?

ALL (BREAD . . . BREAD . . . BREAD! Give us this day our daily BREAD!

1: Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then ...

2: ...a Canaanite woman...

3: ...no, a Syro-Phoenician woman...

¹ Adapted from "Bread: A Readers' Theater," authors: Blackwood, Denney, Godwin, LeBlanc, Miller, Stellman and Varnum

ALL: ... a woman from that region came out and started shouting,

1: Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.'

2: But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying,

ALL: Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.'

3: He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.'

ALL: But she came and knelt before him, saying,

1: 'Lord, help me.'

2: He answered, 'It is not fair to take the children's BREAD and throw it to the dogs.'

3: She said, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the BREAD crumbs that fall from their masters' table.'

1: Then Jesus answered her, "woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.'

3: And her daughter was healed instantly.

CHEAP WHITE BREAD

(1 remains center. 2 & 3 fall back to stage L and R, respectively to sit in their chairs.)

1:

I get sneered at all the time when I pay for my groceries with food stamps. I don't know why those cashiers think they are so much better. Maybe they don't have as many kids as I do. Maybe they have a decent boyfriend or husband who actually works and isn't up in some whores' house getting high. They sigh and roll their eyes. It makes me hate the simplest thing like going to the grocery store. I want to run and hide. But I can't – I need to take care of these kids – I need to pick up our weekly stock of eggs, spaghetti, peanut butter, and cheap white bread.

I'm trying. But it seems like the world is against me. I work. I can work. I do work . . . I work as many hours as I can get at the Qwiky Mart. There aren't many jobs around here if you haven't finished high school.

The other day my girl Jasmine brings home a note that says she is going to flunk gym class if she doesn't bring some sneakers that she can leave at school. In second grade, the kids have to have sneakers that are just used for gym class.

I saved up all summer so I could go to the thrift store and buy the kids a pair of shoes for school. I made Jasmine get sneakers so she could wear them to gym class. Now they're saying it ain't enough.

So, before work, I go up to that school to see if I can talk to someone. When I walk into that fancy air-conditioned office, the guy at the desk doesn't even look up. I clear my throat...(Clears throat)

3: *(Looking down at paperwork.)*

1: *(Clears throat more emphatically.)*

3: *(Finally looking up from papers, looks at 1 as if she doesn't deserve his full attention.)*

1: I need to see Ms. Martin, the principal.

3: She isn't available. You will need to make an appointment to see her.

1: I have to explain my situation and beg her not to flunk Jasmine for not having sneakers to leave at school.

3: The principal doesn't have time to listen to all your excuses. She is running an entire school. Everyone got the school supply list in plenty of time and is expected to send in ALL of the items at the start of school.

1: I *did* send in most of the supplies. I don't know why any kid needs 24 pencils, 2 kinds of markers, 10 glue sticks and a dozen boxes of facial tissue. I just need Jasmine and Johnny to have a different education than I got. They can't flunk because of sneakers. I need 'em to learn all the stuff that will get 'em a better job.

3: Your kids already get a free lunch. Now you want us to buy their shoes, too?

1: He shakes his head and sneers at me. I want to get out of that office so bad. **(3 sits down and 1 stands up)** As I turn around, I run into Ms. Martin. She almost drops her papers, and then gives me that half smile-half irritated 'I'm in her way look.'

I just keep my head down, so the tears don't show and mutter, "I'm sorry."

Then I don't know what came over me, but I just started talking. At first, I was talking to Ms. Martin's back. I don't know why, but she finally turned around and looked at me. Look, I know I'm invisible. It's too late for me but it isn't too late for my kids. They are smart. I know they can have a different life. They just need a chance.

2: What is this about?

1: *(To the audience)* I tell her about the shoes, how tight money is, how the kids are ashamed to be on free lunch; but free lunch is guaranteed each day and dinner isn't. And just because my kids weren't born rich doesn't mean that they don't matter.

She looked at me for a long time--maybe like 10 seconds but it felt like an hour. She wasn't looking me up and down and judging me. She looked at me...and she didn't look away.

2: Let's have a seat in my office. **(1 and 2 lower stands and pull up chairs)** I'm between meetings and I only have a few minutes. I am so sorry to ask you this but would mind terribly if I eat my lunch while we talk? Here, take half my sandwich. It's only peanut butter and white

bread. I know that seems like an odd lunch for an adult but it's my comfort food—reminds me of my childhood.

1: *(To the audience)* She asked about shoe sizes. When I told her, she walked over to a cabinet and pulled out a couple of pair of sneakers.

2: Most kids leave them at school for gym class. At the end of the year some kids outgrow the gym shoes and just leave them here at school.

1: *(To the audience)* Then she asked about my experience with the school...wanted to know if the kids liked it. --- They do, they *love* it. She told me about this after-school program. Said that the kids could work with tutors, play games, get a snack. And it's free. They have a reading program for adults too—if I knew anyone who might be interested.

2: I want you to promise to come see me any time you have a concern. I like getting to know the parents who care so much about their children's education. The school can't do it all and it is important to have parents like you involved. ***(1 and 2 stand up, raise the stands, put their chairs back. 2 sits off stage L).***

1: A parent like *me*, I wonder to myself? No one has ever said that.

Peanut butter on white bread may not look like much, but it's more than crumbs.

I may not look like much, but I am more than crumbs.

(1 center, 2 stage left and 3 stage right – all standing in a straight line, side by side, with their music stands in front of them.)

ALL: Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out.

1: The woman's identity as a Canaanite links the story to ancient Jewish history—the fight against the original inhabitants to possess the land of Canaan.

2: The fact that Matthew changed her identity from Syro-Phoenician to Canaanite emphasized the Jews' disdain for the Canaanites and serves as a reminder of their Otherness.

ALL: The woman started shouting,

3: 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.'

1: According to the social stratification, the Canaanite woman—as a Gentile and as a woman—was part of the unclean class.

2: But she would not accept the limits set for her by a patriarchal culture and society.

3: She resisted the patriarchal norms when she confronted Jesus in public with her request.

1: First, Jesus ignored her. Then he insulted her.

ALL: She was **NOT** welcomed at the table. There was no BREAD for her!

1: The disciples, frightened by the cry of justice raised by the rebellious woman, tell Jesus to send her away.

2: Whenever the subversive oppressed emerge, the oppressor tends to give a quick reply, more from fear of a revolt than from human compassion.

ALL: Perhaps they were afraid there wouldn't be enough BREAD to go around!

SALTY RYE BREAD, BORSCHT & THE BLUES

(2 moves center. 1 moves stage L and 2 stage R. All three stand in line like the beginning, but 1 & 3 put some distance between themselves and 2).

2: I am an immigrant. I came to this country not because I wanted to, but because I had to. I am the child of WAR in my own land – from shores distant from these, and lands and people not from here.

3: You came from Afghanistan and Croatia,

1: from Chad and Darfur, from Iran and Iraq, from Northern and Southern Ireland and Bosnia,

3: from China and Viet-Nam and Korea and Cambodia, Serbia and Chile.

2: I came from any country anywhere in this world, since each place seems capable of disunity, of mistrust and calling another THE OTHER. I came to remain alive, for if I had stayed, I would have died. I didn't want to be here. I don't know the ways or the words of those living here. I sound different.

1: You don't sound like us. You must not BE like us.

3: You don't sound like us. You must not THINK like us.

1 & 3: YOU ARE OTHER.

1: How can you live here and not speak English?

3: Are you stupid? Don't you even try?

2: I have a high school and college education in my country but cannot prove it to you. I came here with nothing – escaping with only my life while bombs blew and guns fired. I am learning English – but it takes time. I am in your factories, I am your maids, I am your weed-killers and lawn-mowers and dishwashers and sewer cleaners, working in invisibility while I learn your English. I have an accent.

3: You don't sound like us. You have an ACCENT!!!!

1: You speak BROKE!!! You say words like ve-ge-tah-ble and tse-hitz-ken (chicken).

3: What shall we do with you? OH – we will TALK LOUD. That will help you understand.

1: We will REPEAT and **REPEAT** and TALK **LOUDER** EACH TIME.

3: THIS WAY we will get through to you. But if you were smart, you would learn to talk and sound like us.

2: I will spend years learning your idioms and perfecting my style. But my "T.H." will never come out TH and my R's will become L's, because we learned human sound differently. Can you hear my soul past your sounds?

How can I explain to you what I know inside? How can I fit in when I can't say what is in my heart? How can I move from being Other to being WE? How can I fit in when only my eyes can share my thoughts?

My dress, my hair, the very foods I eat, my bread is different. The soft white cottony bread of your country is not what I am accustomed to. Must DIFFERENT be troubling for you?

1: Why can't you just eat at McDonalds's like the rest of us? Our bread is the best bread. DO you think you are too good for us – with that rich rye bread and borscht?

(1 center, 2 stage left and 3 stage right – all standing in a straight line, side by side, with their music stands in front of them.)

ALL: 'He answered her...'

1: 'It is not fair to take the children's BREAD and throw it to the dogs.'

2: 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.'

3: In the parable the dogs may not be street scavengers, but the fact remains that they are not truly members of the household as the children are; they are *under* the table, not *at* the table.

1: The woman has awoken to the injustice of this system, the way she has been marginalized, and comes to claim respect and restitution.

2: The Gospel authors' "romantic presentation of the other in this story, as a liminal figure hinders a recognition of the social and historical specificity of the other as the oppressed and derogated figures within a dominant system".

3: The woman courageously takes her place as Other, and in so doing, exposes the brokenness of the system. Then she asks Jesus to heal her, to humanize her.

1: She was determined to have some bread from the table of those who displaced her, knowing that in a household where even the dogs get to eat what the master wastes, there must be some extra bread for the neighbors.

ALL: It's not crumbs she's after. She wants the BREAD.

2: In a clever reversal of expectations, the Syrophenician woman adopts the role Jesus normally plays. In this parable, it is Jesus and the disciples who are hostile. And it is the "othered" woman who directs *them* toward God's mercy.

3: Jesus reorients his understanding of the mission of God. The conversion of Jesus by an outsider encourages the reader to move from exclusivity to inclusivity - where all are welcome at the table.

ALL: Then Jesus answered her,

1: 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.'

2: And her daughter was healed instantly.

RISING BREAD

(3 steps to the center. 2 & 3 fall back to stage L and R, respectively to sit in their chairs.)

3:

Baking is in our family's blood. For generations the men and the women of my family have baked the most delectable breads, pastries, and sweets. One of our family's specialties is country bread. When I was a little boy I remember sitting beside my mom or dad at a table watching them mix the ingredients, letting the bread rise, and then punching it down and beating the heck out of it, only to let it rise once more. According to them, without the punching and extra proofing, it would just be like everyone else's bread.

1: *(comes to music stage L stand)*. Then, son, it rises again. It lifts up. We then mark a cross on the top and put it into the oven. ***(returns to sit)***

3: I'd eagerly wait for the wonderful aroma. When the bread would come out of the oven, all the children in the neighborhood would run in and smother the warm loaves with butter and fruity preserves. They're some of my fondest memories.

Now I'm getting ready to assume responsibility for the family business. It's been a tough transition; for the business and for me. I'm an only child, so the business either carries on through me or else it will no longer be a family business. Now don't get me wrong, I love the family business and I *want* to continue its traditions, but while I'm willing, others in my family haven't been so encouraging. I've felt like this bread sometimes; beaten down, punched, and punched again. Repeatedly until I just wanted to give up instead of rise up.

Things kind of blew up about a year ago. You see, my family didn't know that I was gay and I hadn't told them because it's just *not* something that's kosher if you know what I mean. I had secretly been dating Simon for almost a year, but as far as my family knew he was just a friend. After going out one night we came back here and I was puttering with an oven, when Simon leaned in and kissed me. Just at that moment my mother walked in and saw us. She just stood there and looked at me. The silence was unbearable. I quietly asked Simon to go home and that I'd talk with him later. I remember the moment as if it happened yesterday.

Mom? *(Pause)* Mom, Simon and I . . . *(pause)*. We love each other, Mom.

Mom, are you going to say something?

It felt like I was talking forever, yet she kept ignoring me. I start yelling at her. Mom – why won't you talk to me, why won't you look at me? This is who I am. Simon is who I love. Mom, stop tormenting me like this. Don't you have any compassion? *(Pause)*

1: (*stepping to stage L stand*) This is not the way it is supposed to be.

3: Mom, just love me.

1: It's not fair to ask this of me; to overlook . . .

1: Mom, overlook it or don't, but a mother still loves her child for no other reason than he's her child. Besides, I know the story about how grandma didn't want you in the family because of your ethnic heritage. How can you close me out the same way?

1: That was different – it wasn't something I could change!

3: It is exactly the same – I can't change this either!

(PAUSE)

3: So it has been a year.

1: Honey, you're making such a mess. At least you can wear an apron to keep yourself a little clean can't you? And don't be late, your father will be home at six and then we're going to supper with you and Simon. **(1 sits in chair stage L).**

3: Things are good. You know, I still feel like this dough. But instead of the punching, I feel like the rising dough. I'm lifted up. My wishes have come true. I'm continuing the baking traditions for another generation and I am truly loved.

It's time for the finished loaf to be served to everyone . . . unconditionally.

(1 center, 2 stage left and 3 stage right – all standing in a straight line, side by side, with their music stands in front of them.)

1: The story of the Canaanite women (or the Syrophenician woman) and our contextual retellings are models for a theology of inclusion and a theology of resistance.

2: She demands to be considered as Other and breaks into the empire. She cannot and does not respect human boundaries or even divine boundaries that go against the value of human life.

3: She breaks the boundaries of ethnicity, of the empire, of gender, of culture, and speaks for her daughter.

1: She speaks for the one who cannot speak, for the one who cannot move, for the one who has no strength to fight back against the empire of the male oppressor and against God as male.

2: This woman is not framed by culture or doctrine. She has a place at the table.

3: She presents to Jesus the wide world outside of the empire and the needs of those who are oppressed by the empire. The 'othered' woman helps to usher in the new reign of equality which has come to break the empires.

1: Confronted with such a declaration of confidence and self-affirmation, Jesus can do nothing else than respond positively to the woman's request.

2: Jesus hears her demand and shifts his mission to give the woman the place that she deserves at the table.

3: In the end, her daughter is healed. And, the woman receives sustaining BREAD.

1, 2 & 3 begin singing the hymn...

Let us break bread together on our knees, (on our knees)

Let us break bread together on our knees. (on our knees)

When I fall on my knees

with my face to the rising sun,

O Lord, have mercy on me.