

The Second Sunday in Lent
St. Matthew 15:21-28: Are You Mercy-Having Material?
February 24/25, 2018 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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Lord, we understand that it is good that You humble us. But You know how weak we are in time of trial. Do not give us over to our unbelief and impatience, but purify us and strengthen our faith, to the praise of Your glorious name. Amen. (Laache, *Book of Family Prayer*, p. 211)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the fifteenth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon." / But He did not answer her a word. And His disciples came and begged Him, saying, "Send her away, for she is crying out after us." / He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." / But she came and knelt before Him, saying, "Lord, help me." / And He answered, "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." / She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." / Then Jesus answered her, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was healed instantly. ^(ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Jn. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, whose mercy endures forever, dear fellow redeemed:

The judge and jury were convinced that the defendant was guilty on all charges. He was about to be sentenced for his crimes and imprisoned for the rest of his life. The families of the victims were also present in the courtroom hoping for a conviction. The judge asked the defendant if he had anything more to say before the verdict was announced. He stood on shaky legs and turned to face the victims' families. "I am so sorry," he said. "I deserve whatever punishment I get. I did terrible things, and you have every right to hate me. I am sorry for everything. I hope someday you can find it in your heart to forgive me. I pray for God's mercy."

But on what basis should God be merciful to a man like that? After what he had done, why would he even hope for mercy? The same question may enter your mind when you think about some of things you have done in your life. Will God have mercy on you? If you think He will, why should He? Today's text can at the same time make us feel concerned about this or hopeful. First, the parts that are concerning.

I

In general Jesus carried out His work of teaching and miracles among the Jews. But on a few occasions, He entered into Gentile territory like He did in today's text. The evangelist Mark indicates He did this to have some time away from the crowds (7:24). But a Canaanite woman

heard He was in the area and came looking for Him. She cried out to Him that her daughter was severely troubled by a demon. *"Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David!"* Of course Jesus would help, wouldn't He? How could His loving heart refuse? But He said nothing to her.

The woman continued to cry out for mercy and plead for help. She did this so much, that the disciples begged Jesus to do something about her. Jesus replied, *"I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."* This, too, seems out of character for Jesus. Didn't He come to save all people? But here He seems to say that nationality is the determining factor – Jesus, a Jew, was sent to work among His fellow Jews. This would be something like a doctor in Iowa refusing to treat a person from Minnesota because she did not come from the right place.

But this case was actually not a matter of nationality. It was a matter of promise. God had promised to be with the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Think of how patient He had been with them! He led them to the Promised Land and made them into a great nation. Time after time, He called them back to repentance and faith when they had fallen for the false gods of the nations around them. And finally the LORD sent them a Prophet like Moses to speak good news to them (Deu. 18:15). The LORD loved His chosen people with an enduring, steadfast love. This is why Jesus was so focused on *"the lost sheep of the house of Israel."*

But the Canaanite woman was convinced not only that Jesus *could* help her, but that He *would*. She knelt directly in front of Him and said, *"Lord, help me."* Jesus replied that it was not right to take bread from the children—the children of Israel—and throw it to the dogs, meaning the non-Israelites or Gentiles.

This is where doubt comes in. If Jesus was reluctant to help this woman because she was not part of a certain group, how can you know you stand securely in His favor? I am sure that you, as I do, have certain Christian family members and friends that you admire. It is not difficult to imagine that God is pleased with them. But you feel that you come up far short of their example. You hardly display the same wisdom, patience, and humility as they do. So you wonder: Will God have mercy on me, or am I a lost cause?

Jesus did have mercy on the Canaanite woman. She just wouldn't give up. Even after He said the children's bread is not for the dogs, she quickly replied, *"Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."* Then you can imagine a smile breaking out on Jesus' face as His eyes brightened. *"O woman, great is your faith!"* He said. *"Be it done for you as you desire."*

But here again, doubt creeps in. Jesus had mercy on this woman, but it isn't as though our problems are as serious as hers. You might have a sore back or a bad knee. You might be struggling with something at school or work. You might have relationship problems. You might feel sadness over opportunities lost and times past. But those things do not seem to be in the same category as a demon-possessed child. Why should the Lord concern Himself about our little problems?

Or if it isn't about the size of the problem, we wonder if God's mercy depends on the amount of our faith. God knows—and maybe He resents—the way I treat Him and His Word as a last resort. He can see how little the flame of faith burns in my heart, and how easily distracted I am

by the cares and pleasures of this life. If God's mercy requires the kind of faith the Canaanite woman demonstrated, then I have reason to be concerned.

II

If God's mercy can only be had by people who are good enough or by people with a strong enough faith, then I can't imagine any of us being confident that we have it. But that is not how God's mercy works. His mercy does not depend on a person's worthiness. Then it wouldn't really be mercy; it would be a reward.

God's mercy comes from His own heart, His own gracious disposition toward humankind. This merciful disposition was not evident to the Canaanite woman at first, but that does not mean it wasn't there. Jesus hid His mercy for a time in order to test the woman. But why did He allow this pain-stricken woman to feel even more pain?

We ask the same thing about the difficult times we go through. You may feel as though you cannot bear any more grief or pain or trouble, but more comes. Well-meaning friends tell you to remember that, "God never gives you more than you can handle." But you feel like you reached the limit of what you can handle a long time ago.

The reality is there isn't much that we sinners can "handle" – and really nothing on our own. We are weak; there is no storehouse of spiritual strength inside us. God teaches us to recognize this by testing us. He sends trials our way to purify our faith, like a hot fire that purifies gold. He directs us not to our own worthiness, our resolve, our problem-solving ability, or our own strength. Through tests and trials, He draws our focus to Him.

That is what happened with the Canaanite woman. Jesus' seeming indifference toward her did not push her away. He would never want to do that. His attitude taught her to trust more surely and to hold tighter. This is the encouragement the hymnist gives when he writes:

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy and shall break
In blessings on your head.
Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust Him for His grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.
(ELH 434, v. 2)

The Lord smiles upon you just as He smiled upon that poor woman and her daughter. And He gives you just what He gave her: He gives mercy.

The Lord is merciful – full of mercy. He does not give what is deserved. What you and I deserve is punishment for our sins and a hopeless future. Instead we receive the benefits of God's kindness. He does not push us away from Him, but rather draws us closer. He does this because of the saving work of our Mediator.

Though Jesus may have carried out His earthly work predominately among the Jews, He went to the cross for all people, for Jews and Gentiles. He predicted this many times. Speaking about His work as the Good Shepherd He said, *“And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice”* (Jn. 10:16). About His death He declared, *“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself”* (12:32). By His death on the cross for all sinners, Jesus broke down *“the dividing wall”* that separated Jew and Gentile (Eph. 2:14). He reconciled both to God, *“making peace by the blood of his cross”* (Col. 1:20).

What the death of God’s Son means is that you are not outside the workings of His mercy. Your problems are not too big or too small. Your faith is not too weak. You are not worthy in any way of receiving God’s mercy, but He still gives it abundantly to you and to many more who are just as weak and doubtful as you are.

Are You Mercy-Having Material? That is the same as to ask: Are you a sinner? If you are, then you are in need of God’s mercy, and He will give it. Though He may test you, He will not ignore your humble petition for His help. His promise to every person with a broken and contrite heart is this: *“[W]hoever comes to me I will never cast out”* (Jn. 6:37).

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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