

From the Master's Table
Matthew 15:21-28
Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
August 16, 2020

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text, "Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs from their masters' table."

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Did you notice the continuing trend?... this recurring pattern of the last three Sundays now, in which a miracle of Jesus is, if you will, overshadowed in the text by the dialogue. But, unlike the dialogue around the feeding of the 5000 and around the authority over wind and wave – in both cases, very *straightforward* dialogue – unlike those, this dialogue almost seems more incomprehensible than the miracle itself! What are we to make of Jesus' seeming hesitance to share divine things with the Canaanite woman?

There's an important context clue to help us understand the somewhat cryptic nature of this dialogue. Consider that Matthew's gospel points out that Jesus was in the region of Tyre and Sidon. You might recall the name of that region, a port city region on the Mediterranean, north of Israel, inhabitants not of the house of Israel, an area largely outside of the path of Jesus' public teaching. And yet, it's an area that draws Jesus' sympathy, as the gospels mention that Jesus' ministered to great crowds who *came from* Tyre and Sidon, and – perhaps more notably – when Jesus decries woes upon the

faithless house of Israel, he says to them, “If the works I had done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented!”

In short, this is an area that would seem to not have the grace of God as a constant guest, and yet various times we hear of its inhabitants hungering and thirsting for the Gospel. The contrast with the house of Israel is plain, for the house of Israel *constantly* has Jesus among it – “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” Jesus says – and yet Israel *yawns* at Jesus’ presence.

A microcosm of that contrast is the attitude of the woman versus that of the disciples. She cries out to Jesus as one who so desperately desires his help and confesses him as the divine Son of David... on the contrary, the disciples are bothered by such pleading – as if an annoying nuisance – and even say she is crying out “after us,” as if the *followers* of Jesus are co-recipients of the suffering ones’ cries to the Lord himself! The distinction couldn’t be clearer: the disciples, having become quite comfortable with their status as the “worthy of Israel”, have pre-determined that *she* (*not* of the house of Israel) is unworthy of Jesus’ Messianic work.

This is a recurring problem, it seems, among those who have long benefited from God’s gracious favor – they begin to think that it’s something in *them*, some quality about *them*, that makes them “worthy” of his salvation. They forget that they too have fallen far short of the glory of God and are unworthy of his grace (for, if they were *worthy* of it, it wouldn’t be grace!). Or they forget that they too

– apart from Christ – are under the same sentence of condemnation as all others who are apart from Christ. Does not the epistle reading remind us, “God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all.” And, why does Paul say that, but to remind his readers that Israel – once the chosen of God – had fallen so faithless that they now depend upon the Gentiles to share the Gospel with them, for they have forgotten, grown numb to it, rejected it.

And, if that can be true for the house of Israel, can it not be true for us? We forget that we, too, were consigned to disobedience so that we, too, may be unworthy *beneficiaries* of divine mercy ...not that we may take it for granted and yawn at it, grow numb to it, and ultimately reject it... nor that we may hoard it, consider ourselves worthy of it, isolate ourselves from the annoyances of those desperately needing a share of what is so graciously ours... but so that we may delight in it, live in it, confess it and eagerly rejoice in sharing it with all our fellow man who has – like us – found themselves under the wrath of God and in need of salvation, in need of a Savior who will even help and save the “foreigner.”

Jesus’ response to the woman reminds us what the sinner deserves... what *we* deserve. At first, the text says, he completely ignores her: “he did not answer her a word.” You might be quick to say, “How heartless of him, how merciless of him. How unloving of him.” No, actually, if we meditate on it correctly: “How *just* of Him.” Remember, our God is a *just* God. And if all have sinned and fall short

of the glory of God, then there is no one – no not one – who *deserves* the Lord’s attention. Ponder that for a moment: the disciples weren’t wrong in saying that the Lord had reason to send her away; they were wrong in assuming he *didn’t* have reason to send *them* away!

Indeed, no matter how pity-inducing the situation might be – in this case, the woman’s daughter severely oppressed by a demon – the only response the woman *deserves* is divine silence. In *our* situation of these past five months – pitiful and pitiable, to be sure – the only response we *deserve* from God is divine silence, or – at best – a rhetorical, “What did you expect the Fall into sin would bring with it? Before the Fall, you already *had* heaven on earth; now you have only hints of hell on earth... but only *hints*; for the magnitude of what your sin deserves is coming.”

Yes, that’s the answer we all *deserve*. And yet, far more eagerly than the disciples (who should’ve been rejoicing at Jesus in their presence, Jesus with them every day!)... yet, far more eagerly than the disciples does the woman call out in hope that the Messiah sent by God, the Christ, the Son of David... she calls out in hope that He will have *mercy* on her, though she be *not* of the house of Israel.

This is the proper understanding of faith, isn’t it? Faith is not faith in itself, faith in my status and worth, faith “in faith.” Faith is faith in God’s mercy in Christ Jesus! Faith is the hope that the undeserving who calls upon the name of the Lord will nevertheless

be heard ... and, more than be heard, be acted upon, helped. Indeed, whether a Christian of 80 years or one who is now hearing *for the first time* of the mercies of God in the atoning work of the Son of David, isn't faith's hope exactly the same?: that God sent His Christ into the flesh to atone for the sins of the *whole* world, so that those who are so blessed to hear this good news may rejoice in it and know "that good news is for me! Though unworthy of *any* of it, I am beneficiary of *all* of it!"

And that's sort of the exchange between Jesus and the woman, isn't it? Jesus rightly/justly says, "If I were to act only in accord with justice and holiness, then it is not right, not just, to give to the sinner, the gentile, the foreigner the gifts of heaven. It is not right to take the things of heaven reserved for the offspring of God Most High and throw it to sinners, to the dogs." And, if you listen carefully, the woman *agrees* with him: "Yes, Lord," she begins. "Yes, you are right, Lord. You are a just God and may decide thusly and still be righteous and just." (Isn't this how Luther says it, that we ought worship God simply because He *is*. Not because he gives us good things, but even if – in his divine justice – he were to condemn the whole world – He is still the just and holy God who deserves due worship and praise. This is what the woman acknowledges.) "However," she continues (not to *remind* Jesus, as if he's forgotten, but to confess back to him – as prayer does – what is His good and *merciful* will, to confess back to him that she lives in faith of and

defines her life by His good and *merciful* will), “However,” she prays, “even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”

What an apt description of faith’s humble hope before the holy God! That, even as a dog knows how generous and merciful is the master who even allows crumbs to fall down and be consumed by the mangy mutt, the Lord is merciful in allowing *any* divine help to fall upon the sinners of earth. Yet, there stands and towers over and beckons all of history... there stands (not crumbs, but) the cross of Christ!

Let us learn from the woman’s confession of faith – we who were shocked into having the church doors closed and being separated from the gifts of God, we who at the time said, “I will never take for granted ever again the mercy that falls from the table of the Lord” – and a mere *few months* after having heaven re-opened to us – we are tempted to fall back into the habit of foregoing the divine gifts of God, not out of medical necessity, but perhaps only because of convenience or other priorities... because we assume that our status as children of God (which gives us the *right* to call upon Him) somehow gives us the *right not* to call upon Him and somehow – when yawning at the opportunity to call upon him - makes us worthy of his ongoing grace and care anyway.

How dangerously we play with faith when we do not learn from the woman’s understanding, but instead slide into the mindset of the disciples in our text.

And yet, how gracious is our God even in recording this history for us that we might be taught by a foreigner! How gracious is he in reminding us that she came and *kneled* before him (from the Greek: *proskyneo*) and begged like a dog, not doing tricks or gazing with puppy dog eyes to try and win the master's favor, but simply knowing her lowly state in the presence of God Most High, acknowledging His just holiness if he were to ignore her pleas, and yet also calling out, confident that He is merciful... merciful because He did not die on the cross in vain; nor did he go to the cross for his own benefit. But he went to the cross for you, to pay for your unworthiness with his worthiness, to cover your unholiness with his holiness, and to say, "I will freely give you a share of all that I earn by my suffering and death."

And as he died for the whole world, therefore he bids the whole world – not just the house of Israel – to come and receive that share. Our Old Testament reading says it well: "The foreigners who join themselves to the LORD... everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it *and holds fast my covenant* – these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer."

Yes, he brings you to His holy mountain in the promises of his covenant, brings to it all who do not profane the Sabbath rest that is ours in Christ Jesus... that's the image in our new stained glass window, the mountain on the right, Mt. Zion, not merely a future homeland, but a present-tense Lord's Day dwelling with the Lamb of

God... that we may eagerly and confidently beg, and that he may do far more than allow crumbs to fall from his table, but may graciously give us a seat at his table, that we – like the woman before us – may come and kneel in the presence of our very God and say, “Because you are the holy God, you are just to condemn me. But, more than a master to his dogs, you are gracious and merciful and I rejoice at the gift of your holy body and blood given and shed for me.”

What a pivotal, life-defining and eternity-safeguarding, service He mercifully renders us each week! Consider what this divine service really is, and what it really means, and what’s really at stake! The Introit says it this way: “...be not deaf to me, lest, if you be silent to me, I become like those who go down to the pit.”

You and I could show up here every week, show the sincerity of our faith by braving a pandemic, exhibit the worthiness of our hope by defying social disdain... and we could call out to *no one*. **Our** coming here does not guarantee **God’s** coming here. Our gathering here does not make this service divine. If the holy God so chooses, he would be *just* in remaining deaf to us, being silent to us, and leaving us to the same fate as those who go down to the pit.

Instead, the Holy God who took on flesh and blood and placed it upon the altar of Calvary now brings that same flesh and blood to *this* “altar of Calvary” and says, “I am not deaf to you. I am not silent toward you. I once gave the sacrifice-bearing Christ and now promise the sacrament-bestowing Christ, that you may be

sustained in my gracious favor as children of God and *not* go down to the pit.”

Ought this not remind us what salvation by grace alone actually means: we could call upon him, call upon him, call upon him, and yet never *deserve* a response... and He would be just in giving us sinners the silent treatment and leaving us to go down to the pit. But, “Blessed be the Lord, for he has heard the voice of my pleas for mercy,” the psalm says. And, more than that, more than hearing, he acts: “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord... who comes in the name of the “Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God of Sabaoth.”

This is *why* – as the psalm of the Introit says – we lift up our hands toward His most holy sanctuary... not in effort to win his attention, but in faith and confidence that He hears and delivers His people. The divine service is no empty ritual in which we sing to a wall, a statue, and a wooden altar... it is the participation of the sinner with the holy God; it is the dogs (who would be so blessed if mere unintended scraps fell from the table) nevertheless having the full ear of God, full attention of God, indeed being fed the full bounty of God... His good will to govern and provide for every day of life – that we may joyfully pray the words of our Collect: “Father, You give Your children many blessings even though we are underserving.”

In the Name of the Father
 And of the Son
 And of the Holy Spirit.
 + AMEN +

Rev. Mark C. Bestul
Calvary Lutheran Church
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