

Matthew 15:21-28

Pentecost 11 + Proper 15A + August 16, 2020
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
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A Dog in the House of the Lord

The Word of the Lord from Matthew 15:28: "Then Jesus answered her, 'O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.' And her daughter was healed instantly." This is the Word of the Lord.

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

"Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David." The first words that we hear from the woman are a Kyrie, "Lord, have mercy." She's come to find Jesus, to pray for His mercy. It's a little unlikely: Matthew makes it a point that she's a Canaanite, an Old Testament term to say she's from a people thoroughly pagan and hostile to God. But here she is.

"Have mercy on me," she cries. She's there for her demon-oppressed daughter. The child might be a long ways from calling upon the Lord for help, but her mother has come to do what godly parents do for their kids: she intercedes on her behalf.

What's so wonderful is her honesty. She calls Jesus "Lord, Son of David," a very Jewish term. She's a Canaanite woman who says, "I know that you're the Jewish Messiah and I'm a Canaanite, but I'm still calling upon You to have mercy and deliver my daughter."

This woman's got it right, but do the disciples? Rather than look to Jesus to be merciful, they bid Him, "Send her away, for she is crying out after us." They might just be rude, but I think there's more. It may well be that they're saying, "Send her away, because what does the Jewish Messiah have to do with an unclean Canaanite woman who has demon-possessed people in her household?"

This is where Jesus starts to say things that sound strange to our ears. He says to the disciples, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Is that true? It must be – it's Jesus speaking, after all. From the sounds of it, a Canaanite woman is out of luck when she asks Him for mercy.

She doesn't take no for an answer, though. Instead, she prays, "Lord, help me."

It seems like it gets worse. Jesus says, "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." "Children" is slang for "Jews" and "dogs" is slang for "Gentiles." As if things aren't looking bad for the woman already, Jesus says, "I'm here for the kids, not for the dogs; and I say you're a dog." Or, to decode: "Did I not just say, O *Gentile* woman, that I am here for the house of Israel?"

But ... what makes someone part of the house of Israel?

See, it's common to think that, when Jesus speaks of the House of Israel – the children of Abraham, He's speaking of His fellow Jews, and only Jews. But that's not right: as we hear in Galatians 3:6-7, the sons and daughters of Abraham are those who share his faith, not his DNA. Abraham believed in Jesus, yet to be born, and it was credited to him as righteousness. If you believe in Jesus, who has since been born, crucified and raised again for your salvation, then you're part of the house of Israel.

In fact, we have another name for the Israel of God: we call it the church, a house of prayer for all peoples.

Back to our Canaanite woman, then, whom Jesus has just called a Gentile dog and said He's only there for Israel. Her response is marvelous, for she says, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." In other words, "Fine, Lord. I'm a dog. I'm a Gentile. But You're still my Master, and I believe You can help me. See, I might be a Gentile and not a Jew, but I'm You call an Israelite because I believe in You. I might be a dog, but by faith I'm also a child. Not only that, but I even believe that only a crumb from Your table is enough to heal my daughter."

No wonder Jesus delights to say, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." Why is her faith so praiseworthy? It's the faith of the Christian, that Jesus is the Son of God who has come to redeem the world, and all who believe in Him are His forgiven people. How unlikely to find such a child of the house of Israel in the land of the Gentiles. But there she is.

And to demonstrate that He is there to deliver His people like her, He answers the woman's prayer and heals her daughter instantly.

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If you are ever tempted by the devil to believe that Jesus didn't die for you, you simply say, "But Jesus died for all nations, all peoples, and I am certainly included in that!" Then for an extra measure say, "And I know that He has forgiven *me*, because I am baptized."

You might take this for granted now; but in severe trial or near death, it is easy to question whether or not you are included among those for whom Christ has died. The answer is yes. Christ has redeemed you. As you trust in Him for salvation, you're part of His household, a true Israelite by God's definition.

Likewise, you have no doubt that the Lord hears your prayers. You're free in Christ to be perfectly honest. You don't try to hide your sins and conceal your faults: if you do, then you're trying to fool Jesus into helping you, and He doesn't honor prayers by pretenders. So you go before the Lord and pray, "Lord have mercy on me, a sinner." He forgives your sins. He promises to hear and answer your prayers.

He promises to hear your prayers on behalf of others, even as this woman pled for her daughter. *Please:* do not give up on praying for others, for the Lord hears your prayers. He hears because you're among His chosen people.

So the church, the Israel of God, is composed of all penitent sinners who trust in Jesus – all of them. We should note that the Lord will welcome people outside of our comfort zone. When the Lord welcomes penitent sinners, that includes the penitent homosexual, the penitent who struggles with gender dysphoria, the penitent addict, the penitent racist, and the penitent individual who hurt you deeply. Note the word *penitent* in each of those: the church is made up of penitent, repentant, sinners, whatever their past sins and current struggles. All who repent and trust in Jesus receive God's grace. I daresay that for those who struggle with such things, the household of God may be the only family they have.

When you encounter penitent sinners outside your comfort zone, you'll be tempted like the disciples in our text to plead with Christ, "Send them away." But woe to us if we say such about those to whom Jesus says, "Come unto Me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest." That's not just a lack of compassion for those in need of grace; to pray "Send them away" is to tell Jesus you're the judge of who should and shouldn't be in His kingdom.

While some sins are more damaging in this world, and some strike us as ickier than others, Christ died with all of them on His shoulders. Keep in mind that this means, in part, that if your sins are the

ones that are socially acceptable within a congregation because "everybody does them," they are just as offensive to God as the sin that creeps you out the most.

This also means that if *you* struggle with such sins, Christ has died for all of your sins too. These are some of the most difficult trials to endure: do not accept them, but by the grace of God continue a penitent fight to do what God would have you do.

See, you're not going to heaven because your sins are more or less offensive than others, nor does Jesus help you because you're more or less offensive than others. It's not about the kind of sin, but about God's gifts of repentance and forgiveness for you.

God's grace and mercy are for you because Christ has died for your sins.

His grace and mercy are for you because He has given you the gift of repentance, of sorrow for your sin and trust in your Savior.

And His grace and mercy are for you because He preserves this faith in you so that you might continue to repent and trust in Jesus.

Whether you're called a Jew, a Gentile or even a dog of a person, this is true: once you were called a lost sinner. Now you are called a child of God – born in baptism, fed by His Word and His Supper. You are part of the Israel of God, a beloved child, both now and forevermore.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen