

St. Mark's Lutheran Church Charlotte, NC

20 August 2023

Pentecost 12 (Lectionary 20)

Matthew 15.21-28

Persistence. Indeed!

Rev. Dr. Marcus Miller

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, our Lord and our strength. Amen.

It is an honor to be with you this morning and I am grateful for Pr. McKenzie's invitation to stand in this pulpit and at that table with you on this day. St. Mark's congregation is not entirely unfamiliar to me: when I was at our seminary in Columbia, the women's guild had a few gatherings here that I was honored to attend; I have had the privilege of meeting some of you at various events in the Charlotte area during my decade of residence in Huntersville; I have enjoyed getting to know some of your previous pastors as friends and spouses as colleagues and friends; and my wife and I had the great honor to attend the 100th anniversary of the Lutheran Seminary in Tokyo in 2011 and Pr. McKenzie and Mari were our kind and gracious hosts while we were there. So, I feel a bit of a connection to you and am appreciative to be in this lovely space to hear God's Word and receive the sacrament of the eucharist.

One of the blessings of being retired is that when a pastor accepts an occasional preaching invitation, a pastor can take time to let the texts that are assigned for that day marinate. Not having to preach each week with the press of responsibilities of a full time called pastor is a gift that I treasure. This was the case when about four weeks ago, Pr. McKenzie and I had the chance to connect; the calendar for August 20 was open and I could accept the invitation. Before leaving for some time away I read the texts for today and took along copies of them to read and mull over during the time away. And so I did and read the lessons for today, each one of which is a word from God about the breadth of God's mercy extending in Jesus to all people.

Isaiah reminds his hearers in the first lesson that God's house shall be called a "house of prayer for all people." St. Paul concludes a section of his letter to the Romans to remind his friends in Rome that God's mercy and calling to people are "irrevocable" and include the ancient Hebrew people and the Jews of his day and ours. But it was the story of the Canaanite women in today's Gospel that secured my attention and my mulling. And it had my attention not always for the most uplifting and loving of reasons.

Matthew reports to us that Jesus stretched the boundaries of his reach to the district of Tyre and Sidon, some distance away from where "his people" were. In fact, this region was home to people that "Jesus' people" considered unclean and undesirable. And he was approached by a woman whose name we do not know and whose god we do not know. But her daughter was possessed by a demon and this woman had heard about Jesus and hoped that he could assist her and her daughter in their distress. All of us who have been privileged to be parents know that we would move heaven and earth, as they say, to make sure our children are safe, healthy and cared for – even when they enter adulthood and have left the nest. This mother was no different and her torment over her malady was evident. She would do anything for her child, spare no expense and even risk the embarrassment of approaching a person who would consider her someone "less."

But that is not what got my attention as I walked the beach and mulled this text over in my mind and heart. Jesus ignored her. "He did not answer her at all." There are few experiences that we have in life that are more demeaning and hurtful than being ignored. Whether it is calling the appliance repair service, leaving a message that the washing machine needs repair and not even getting a return call or the request to a person in authority and power (the teacher at school, the town or city council person, the religious leader) for help in addressing a problem or a situation in our lives and being ignored is painful at the least, demeaning at worst. But Jesus, Matthew tells us, "did not answer her at all."

How can this be? This is not the Jesus that we know. The Jesus we know felt the tug on the hem of his garment from the woman who suffered from hemorrhage, saw the hunger of the people who came out to hear him preach but forgot to bring their lunch, went to Jairus' home to heal his daughter, saw Mary

and John at the foot of the cross and in the midst of his pain gave them to each other. How can this be?

And then the disciples get into the act. They want Jesus to send this pest away – because she kept shouting (you can understand that since may have been her last, best hope for her child) and they wanted things to be neat and tidy. That is the way it sometimes is with followers of Jesus who know his love. They kind of want to keep it for themselves and make sure that the people they meet clean up after themselves.

And then when Jesus does acknowledge her, he states that he was sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel – and she is not a part of that clan. At least here he is not ignoring her, but giving an explanation – kind of like you and I hearing that the person we are addressing doesn't have time, that the request is not her department, that he does not do that kind of repair, that this is for residents of our HOA only.

How can this be? I don't know. Jesus certainly did not play games with people, he did not behave in a way to "make a point." The best I can do here is to say that he was being fully human here in his response. He was behaving in a way that we humans behave – that we find comfort with "our people" and are a little suspicious of the "other." We see the human nature of our Lord in full display here – just like us in every regard.

But this unnamed hero of the story, this Canaanite woman, persists and will not take "no" for an answer and during that Jesus sees her faith and teaches her and those around just how wide God's mercy is. This woman's daughter was healed immediately.

It is beautiful story that Matthew records for the building up of our faith. I do wish I could have the chance to hear what you are hearing in this story of Jesus love for the woman and her daughter and maybe we can chat about that at the door this morning after worship. But here is what I hear in this story.

The mercy sent into the world in the person of Jesus Christ is meant for all. There are no boundaries for who can hear this, who can be healed by this who can

be loved by God through this mercy – it is for all. That not only shaped Jesus' ministry, it continues to shape ours. I cannot help but believe that there are at least a few people here this morning who are wondering if God can be merciful even to me, after what I have done or who I am and what my background is. One of the blessings of the pandemic has been the use of the media and we know that there are those who tune in to hear because they wonder if they would really be welcomed into the space to hear. Let it be said in no uncertain terms that God's mercy in Jesus is for you.

And that good news not only shapes the hearer, it also shapes the bearers of that Good News. I have visited scores of churches over the years and I pay attention to what happens in the narthex before worship and after worship is over. I give thanks for those who make sure that the newcomer, the visitor, the curious seeker is welcomed because we all know how easy it is to stay in our own group.

And then secondly we give thanks for this woman's persistence and her love for her daughter. She was asking what every parent would ask for their child and did not give up. In our lives of prayer we pray not only for God's blessing, presence or gift but we pray so that our desires become more clearly known to us. That we, no matter how strong we believe we are, are the ones in need. That sometime our requests in prayer are only for our benefit.

Persistence indeed!

And today we join with the whole church to give thanks for this foreign woman of faith who, through her example, brings each of us closer to the love of Christ made known through the words of Scripture, the blessing of the eucharist and the welcome of this community of faith that surrounds us today.

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