

August 20, 2017  
Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32  
Matthew 15:21-28

The Challenge to Have Mercy

Jackson, this is not the scripture passage I would have chosen for your baptism today. Lord have mercy, this is not how I wanted to introduce you to the stories of our faith. This Bible passage is not ideal. We've got some mean disciples. We've got a rude Jesus. We've got a humiliated Canaanite woman having to beg like a dog for Jesus' help. This is not a nice story, Jackson. As ministers like to say, it doesn't preach well. But Jackson, this is today's assigned reading in our lectionary and it is our reading for a reason. Because this IS a story about faith. It is a story about who God really is. And that God is merciful to all. And sometimes God needs to be reminded of that. And sometimes we need to be reminded of that. And we need to remind each other of that. God's mercy isn't for one kind of people. God's mercy does not exist for one community or one race or one nation. It exists for everyone. And it will always be surprising us. It will always be challenging us to be merciful. And we hope it will challenge you, Jackson. We hope that it will challenge you to speak up for mercy in the world.

Our story today is a challenge. It begins with a Canaanite woman challenging Jesus and his disciples to help her. And it would seem like a surprise for her to do that. But they are in her neighborhood, in the region of Tyre and Sidon. THEY have arrived on HER doorstep, so that's not surprising. What IS surprising, is that she is a Canaanite. Because technically there weren't any Canaanites in Jesus' time. The Canaanites had been gone for over 500 years. They were the long-ago enemies in the old Bible stories. For us, it would be like an Apache Indian turning up in a story now or a Pawnee from a Hollywood Western. The Canaanites of long ago were the native pagans, that Israel had overthrown them when they had moved into the Promised Land. All with the blessing of God and a big 'thumbs up' for their extermination. That's what people would have thought immediately about this Canaanite woman. That she was not one of God's people and had no right to God's blessing.

But this Canaanite woman thinks she does have a right to something. She thinks she has a right to ask Jesus for mercy. To ask him to heal her daughter. She had probably heard of Jesus healing others. She had

probably heard of him opening blind eyes and setting captives free and casting out demons. And maybe he can cast out the demon in her daughter. Even if she is a Canaanite. Maybe, maybe he will have mercy for the sake of a child.

But strangely enough, Jesus doesn't seem to be inclined to do so. He doesn't seem to think that this is his job. Like so many in his time and in his culture, he didn't think of her people as his people. They were different. They were other. They were inconsequential. So Jesus ignores the woman as she shouts for mercy. Maybe he was hoping that she would get the hint and go away. Maybe Jesus didn't want to get involved. Maybe he thought Canaanites weren't his department. Maybe he thought he was taking a stand for God. It's disconcerting, to say the least, because we expect more from Jesus. We expect more than silence. And so does the Canaanite woman. She doesn't stop pestering Jesus, hounding Jesus. Even the disciples try to send her away. Even Jesus tries to send her away, but she won't go. She keeps demanding mercy. Now I'm not sure I would have done the same thing. At that first sign of 'no' from Jesus, I probably would have walked away. I would have given

up if I had gotten stony silence from the Lord. “Sorry to have bothered you Jesus. I can see you are busy. And I’m not the kind of person you help. I’ll be going now.” See, I am kind of a quitter like that, when I run up against difficult situations. I don’t want to cause problems or rock the boat. I would just accept things as they are and accept the world as it is. Because there’s nothing I can do about it. But the Canaanite woman doesn’t do that. She isn’t like that. Because her daughter’s life is at stake. And for the sake of love, she will not quit fighting for her. She will ignore the icy glares. She will ignore the cold comments that she doesn’t deserve anything from God according to the Bible. She will stand there and be humiliated and just take it, all for the sake of her daughter. And she will keep asking for mercy. For the sake of the one she loves, she will not give up.

Maybe we know how it feels to fight for mercy. To have to wrestle for God’s blessing, like Jacob wrestling with the angel. Because we won’t give up. We can’t walk away. For the sake of the ones we love, we’ll do whatever it takes. For our parents going through treatment, we will spend time on the phone arguing with insurance companies. For our kids

struggling at school, we will fight for the assistance they need. For the friend being run through the gossip mill, we will stand up again and again. Maybe you know hard it is to demand mercy from the world. Maybe you know the work of asking again and again for things to change.

In our Friends of Refugees group, we are working as teams with three family groups. One team is supporting a family from the Congo. And it hasn't been easy. Helping this family hasn't been as simple as cutting a check and saying 'see you next month'. The team members have had to speak up over and over again. They have had to make sure documents are in order, and that agencies are giving the help they need, that the rent gets paid so the family doesn't get evicted from their apartment. They have had to speak up. And raise their voices and get people's attention for the sake of this family.

That's what we, as the church, have to do sometimes, Jackson. You and I, and all of us here together, we have to speak up. Like the Canaanite woman, we will have to speak up for the sake of others, for the weak and the sick, and the outsider and the unwelcome. Even when others don't

want to listen. Or they want to send us away. We will have to keep insisting again and again that others deserve God's mercy. We must challenge the world to do better. And, Jackson, you might have to challenge us to do better. You might have to challenge Jesus and his followers to do better. Like the Canaanite woman, you and I and all of us here together, we are supposed to speak up for God's mercy.

I want you to notice something about the Bible passage this morning, Jackson. Notice what Jesus' disciples do. Notice they don't ask for mercy. They urge Jesus to get rid of her. They say, Send this woman away. It's same thing they about the hungry crowd of 5000 people that had come to see Jesus in a deserted place. Send them away, the disciples' said. And sometimes, we might want to say that as disciples. We might want to look out for Jesus' best interest. We might want to protect Jesus and turn people away especially when they are a pagan, or a foreigner, or a nobody asking for help. Send them away, the disciples say. Send her away. Jesus, you are here for us. Your mercy is for us and people like us. Not for people like her. And Jesus seems to agree with

this line of thinking. “There are too many mouths to feed. I’m sorry. I’m here for my own. The children’s food shouldn’t go to the dogs.”

What is going on here? What is happening with Jesus? Some say that Jesus is teasing this woman with a little joke. Or that he’s testing her faith. Or that he’s being ironic and this is reverse psychology and he means to be merciful all along. But I disagree. Because those interpretations demand a bunch of mental gymnastics to protect Jesus as a nice guy. But when the Bible was written, no one needed to protect Jesus. Because excluding outsiders was acceptable and holy. What we have here is a challenge to the system that Jesus was a part of. A challenge to their core beliefs about God and God’s mercy. And if we want to whitewash this passage and protect Jesus and protect our Bibles and protect our traditions, then we will protect ourselves right out of God’s power to change us. And to change the things that need to be changed in our world for mercy’s sake. Notice, it’s not the disciples, the good religious folks, who have great faith in our story. It’s the Canaanite woman, this pagan nobody from nowhere who shows them all that faith means not giving up. It means sacrificing all for the sake of love.

I think Jesus learned something here. This Canaanite woman helped Jesus see his mission in a brand new way. He wasn't there just to show God's faithfulness to his own people. He wasn't there to share God's mercy with one nation. But with people of all nations. Because mercy isn't mercy unless it's mercy for everyone. Faithfulness isn't faithfulness unless it doesn't quit on anyone. And the Canaanite woman challenged Jesus and surprised him with what she was willing to do for her daughter. Because even dogs get crumbs, don't they? Even the worthless ones, don't they deserve a little bit of mercy? Isn't love just love after all?

The Canaanite woman speaks up for her daughter. She speaks up for the sake of love. She speaks up and she won't quit speaking up for mercy. She holds on and she won't let go. And I think that made a big impression on Jesus. Her persistence. Her faithfulness, right or wrong, for the sake of love. Her willingness to be humiliated. To be insulted. To lay down her life for the sake of another. It made a big impression on Jesus. And Jesus would end up doing the same thing. In the end, he would be faithful. He would speak up for others. He would insist in front

of the Pharisees and religious leaders that God be bigger and better. For the sake of others, he would be humiliated. He would be scorned and rejected by his own. For the sake of others, he would die. He would hold on to us and not let go. Because love is love after all.

That's our story, Jackson, today and every day. That's Jesus' mission and the mission that you and I and all of us here are a part of; the mission to speak up for God's mercy. We are here to insist on mercy in the world. To insist on mercy from God. To insist on mercy from ourselves and from our leaders. To insist on mercy for the sake of others, for the sake of the least and the last and the lost. I hope you are challenged, Jackson. I hope you and I and all of us here are always challenged by our God whose mercy is greater than we think. Whose compassion extends from here to there and us to them. Whose love for creation and every human being will not quit and will not ever let us go. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.