

SERMON: KEEPING THE FAITH EVEN WHEN JESUS SAYS NO!

(READ Matthew 15: 21-28 ONLY, Preached at MPC on August 20th, 2017)

Some scripture is easy, but some is not. Today's Gospel lesson is not easy. It's the story of a mother whose child is "tormented by a demon" and who asks Jesus for help—and Jesus says, "No." That is surprising and not the kind of response that we expect from Jesus—but I believe that the Holy Spirit inspired Matthew to include this story for a reason, so we need see what it might have to say to us.

In this story, Jesus goes to the region of Tyre and Sidon, north of Galilee—the farthest north that Jesus ever travels—if you were a Jew and your destination was Tyre and Sidon, these cities would be code for "Paganland." When Jesus goes to Tyre and Sidon he is no longer in Jewish territory. There aren't many or any synagogues in Tyre and Sidon.

When this mother comes to ask help for her daughter, Matthew tells us that she was a Canaanite woman. The Canaanites had been enemies of the Israelites. The fact that she was a Canaanite woman would be a real turnoff to the first readers of this Gospel. How could a Canaanite expect anything from Jesus? Her people had fought and killed Israelites. She worshiped the wrong god or perhaps no god at all. If you kneel before pagan idols on the Sabbath, don't ask Jesus for help now!

That was certainly the disciples' take on it. Matthew tells us that this woman came shouting at Jesus in fact screaming at Jesus. The noise got on the disciples' nerves. They told Jesus, "Send her away for she cries after us". We can understand that, can't we! We hate it when people shout at us. We say, "Calm down—please talk to me in a civil tone." Please, "Don't shout!" But the disciples failed to notice what this woman was saying. YES, she is shouting! YES, she is annoying! But listen to her words. She says, "Have mercy on me, Lord, you son of David!". In the original language it is *Kyrie, eleison*, Lord, have mercy.

Perhaps you recognize those words. These are words that Christians use in worship yet today. *Kyrie, eleison*, Lord, have mercy. *Christos, eleison*, Christ have mercy. *Kyrie, eleison*, Lord, have mercy. If you have performed sacred music in a choir or listen to classical music, you have heard those words—beautiful words set to haunting music! What do these words really express? Those words express our deepest longing for mercy—a longing for God to love us in spite of ourselves—a longing for God

to help us, even when we don't deserve it—it's a plea that God will not demand a strict accounting—a plea that we might be treated as sons and daughter rather than as hired help. Lord, please don't send us away if we make a mistake. Don't throw us under the bus! Don't give up on us. Love us until we can do better! *Kyrie, eleison!* Lord, have mercy!

There are people in the world who believe they need no mercy—but in fact such people need mercy more than anyone. Those folks who believe they need no mercy tend to show no mercy. They may call themselves righteous, but others call them self-righteous. Rigid, they say. Humorless! Not much grace! Jesus didn't have much use for such self-righteous people.

Now this Canaanite woman isn't praying that Jesus will forgive her sins. She is praying that Jesus will heal her daughter. But the way she says it is interesting. "Have mercy on me, Lord, you son of David! My daughter is severely demonized!". You would think that she would say, "Have mercy on my daughter," but she says, "Have mercy on ME!"

The daughter is tormented, but the mother is tormented too—it's a torment that all mothers know and feel when their daughter is being tormented. The mother is praying, of course, that Jesus will heal her daughter so that she and her daughter might be released from their torment. *Kyrie, eleison!* Lord, have mercy!

But Jesus says nothing. Nothing! Matthew says, "But he answered her not a word." And then the disciples say, "Run her off, Jesus. We can't stand her screaming!" We expect Jesus to put the disciples in their place and to help this woman. Instead, he tells the disciples, "I wasn't sent to anyone but the lost sheep of the house of Israel"—this means, "I was sent only to help the Jews." How disappointing!

And then the woman kneels as in worship before Jesus and pleads, "Lord, help me." Now come the words that shock us— words that we cannot imagine Jesus saying words that no preacher wants to explain. Jesus says, "It is not appropriate to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." Oh, no, Jesus, please don't say that! Please wipe out those words! Start over again! You can do better! Please, Jesus! But the words stand! There they are in the Bible. "It is not appropriate to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."

Jesus not only refuses to help this tormented woman and her tormented daughter, but he also insults them by comparing them to dogs. It's almost more than we can bear. If this truly represents who Jesus is, we might have to re-evaluate our faith. How can we worship someone who would look at this woman on her knees and say, "It is not appropriate to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs"?

I cannot make this an easy story to understand but I would like to draw your attention to three things: First, the Gospel of Matthew is the most Jewish of the Gospels. The author wrote it for a church that had been primarily Jewish, but was becoming more and more Gentile. He had a concern for giving the Jews a Jewish Messiah—a Messiah who would put the Jews first. That comes across in this story, where Matthew has Jesus equate Jews to children and Gentiles to dogs. Jews first—that was the message.

And Matthew didn't exclude Gentiles from God's plan—indeed, it is Matthew who records the Great Commission—"Go unto all nations" at the end of this Gospel. But concern for Gentiles, in this Gospel is reflected for the most part after Jesus' resurrection not before. The story of this woman and her daughter comes earlier, at a time when Jesus is devoting himself primarily to the Jews.

Second, the word that Jesus uses for dogs is a word for family pets. His language is not as harsh as it sounds at first. Jesus is saying that, in any family, children come first. Pets have their place, too, but children come first. It is a way of telling this woman that he has a responsibility now to Jews. Gentiles will get their chance but not yet.

Third and the most important—is to notice how this story turns out. Jesus, on many occasions, gets into verbal jousting with some heavy hitters—scribes, Pharisees, rabbis. I cannot think of a single instance in which Jesus ever lost such a battle, except this one. Time after time, the brightest and the best come after Jesus with their toughest questions, testing Jesus, trying to trip him up and time after time he sends them away with their tails between their legs. That's the way that it always works except for this time.

When Jesus says, "It is not appropriate to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs," this Canaanite woman gets a gleam in her eye. She says, "Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their masters' table." And she has him! She has bested him in an argument, the only time it ever happens! And I think that Jesus was

delighted to be bested. Just notice how he responds. "Woman, great is your faith! Be it done to you even as you desire." Don't you hear the joy in those words the exuberance! "Woman, great is your faith! Be it done to you even as you desire."

Jesus loves it! Now he can help this woman! Matthew tells us, "And her daughter was healed from that hour!" Right away! Immediately! I also think Jesus was perhaps looking for an opening, an opportunity to reconcile his responsibility to the Jews and his love for this Gentile woman. I believe He was looking for an opportunity to answer this woman's request to *Kyrie, eleison!* —to **show** her mercy! Jesus showed this woman mercy that day and teaches us how to do it by setting the example!

Now mercy and grace are often confused. While the terms have similar meanings, grace and mercy are not the same—here's the difference: mercy is God not punishing us as our sins deserve, and grace is God blessing us even though we don't deserve it. Mercy is deliverance from judgment. Grace is extending kindness to the unworthy. Mercy and grace are best illustrated in the salvation that is available through Jesus Christ. We deserve judgment, but if we receive Jesus Christ as Savior, we receive mercy from God and we are delivered from judgment.

With the recent horrific demonstration condemning hate and racism in Charlottesville and the terrorist attack in Barcelona Spain, we know we live in a continually violent, unloving, unkind, and mean world. And from our small group discussions in our recent PDC retreat, the consensus of one of the least ways we exist as a church here at MPC is our witness and evangelism.

Let me share some principles from Pastor Rick Warren on how we can be agents of mercy in a violent and mean world. How many of you remember the shows "Man from Uncle" or "I Spy?" If you remember those shows you are truly dating yourselves—I remember playing that hit song "Secret Agent Man" by Johnny Rivers in 1966, that had inspirational undertones for agent 007 James Bond. I wanted to be one of those secret agents to change people and impact the world!

In Acts 1:8, Jesus calls us to be his witness by sharing the good news. Pastor Rick says, in a mean, unloving, rude, unkind, and violent world, our greatest witness to Christ is by showing mercy! Here are 4 principles Pastor Rick shares that can us help show mercy. 1) build a purposeful lifestyle where you start looking and listening for people's needs. Phil. 2:4 says, "Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others."

One of the greatest gifts you can give someone is the gift of your time. Jesus gave his time and attention with the Canaanite woman today instead of sending of her away like the disciples wanted. You want to show someone mercy, give them your complete attention and your time!

Num 2). Don't be offended by an unbeliever's sins. Grace and mercy is unconditional! Jesus hung out with the worst sinners of his day—prostitutes, tax-collectors, drunks, etc. You can't look out for someone if you are looking down on them. Jesus always put loving people first even enemies. 1 Peter 4:8 says, "Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins." Simply put, Pastor Rick says, we can't expect unbelievers to act like believers until they are. They don't have the power of God in them yet to make that change! Jesus explains to the Pharisees why he associates with tax collectors and sinners in Matt. 9:13, "Go and learn what this means, I desire mercy not sacrifice for I have come not to call the righteous but sinners."

Num. 3) Choose your words carefully! Mercy should put a monitor over your mouth! If people expressed more love and mercy through their words, the world would be a different place. Col. 4:6 says, "When you talk you should always be kind and pleasant always gracious, seasoned with salt, so you many know how to answer everyone. You can't be persuasive if you are abrasive. Eph. 4:29 says, "Let no evil talk come out or your mouth but only what is useful for building up." Speak encouraging words to people so they will become stronger—to those who listen to you, this will help them to do good. If you are in a family, job, or situation where people are being constantly put down and judged critically, ask God to bless you with godly wisdom and speech. James 3:17 says, "But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceful, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.

Num 4). Value saving people over keeping rules. Jesus modeled this behavior all the time. Rules are not as important as saving people. If his disciples were hungry on the Sabbath and picked grain, considered work, the disciples ate because they were hungry. We know Jesus healed a man with a shriveled hand on the Sabbath. Jesus really came down hard on the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23:23 when he said, "Woe to you hypocrites; for you tithe mint, dill, and cumin and have neglected the weightier matters of the law; justice and mercy and faith. It is these you should have practiced without neglecting the others.

Friends, Jesus demonstrates today even when he said no to the Canaanite woman, but because of her faith, he shows her mercy by giving his time and attention to heal her and her daughter. May we learn to show mercy by looking and being attentive to people's needs. May we learn to show mercy by looking past their behavior and loving them unconditionally. May we learn to show mercy by choosing our words carefully and value saving people over keeping our own set rules, agendas, or objections. Let us keep the faith by showing the mercy of Christ! Lord Have Mercy on Us! Amen.

