



SUNDAY SERMON

## Mercy in Motion

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“(She)...came out and started shouting, ‘Have mercy on me, Lord’...” (Matt. 15: 22). When the Canaanite woman in today’s story approaches Jesus, she cries out from a place of deep need for the strength to cope with a challenge that seems overwhelming. Her daughter is possessed by a demon and she makes an impassioned plea for the restorative power of God to relieve the girl’s suffering and hers. She is every parent who has ever despaired over a child in danger; she is every one of us who feels the weight of our and others’ wounds, burdens and fears that can seem too heavy to bear.

In shouting “Lord have mercy” she joins faithful people who called out to God for centuries before her and continue to call out today. Reciting the verse Kyrie eleison or “Lord have Mercy” in our worship, we join this eternal call as people dependent on the goodness of God for all that matters most in our lives.

In today’s world of texting and social media LHM is an acronym for Lord Have Mercy used as a response of exclamation for news shared among friends. On the internet it may have various meanings, but in the Bible these words express a yearning for us to live in God’s protective embrace. Mercy refers not merely to pity or forgiveness but to the fullness of God’s compassionate care for us.

In Hebrew the phrase that comes closest to our word “mercy” is “loving kindness” -- a capacity for inexhaustible faithfulness that describes God’s way of relating to us but is not necessarily a quality that comes naturally to humans. We offer one another glimpses of God’s mercy by living as people who manifest loving kindness. Theologian William Willimon helps us to understand Jesus as the embodiment of God’s mercy. He writes: “It’s one thing to feel compassion, but it’s another thing to show compassion, to act mercifully... Mercy is compassion in motion... Jesus is mercy in motion.”\*

Jesus’ world is suffering from a dire shortage of mercy. In Roman-occupied Palestine, the traditional way of life known by Israelites is under threat from economic exploitation, high taxes and military harassment.

And Jerusalem’s religious leaders can no longer be counted on as stewards of Israel’s covenant bond with God, grounded in reliance on God’s mercy. They are more concerned about enforcing correct behavior in religious rituals than in helping the faithful have a deeper relationship with this generous God.

Jesus’ mission is to renew that relationship through teaching and works of healing that announce God’s kingdom, and he has told his disciples that their ministry is focused for now only on Israel. Jesus attracts growing crowds. Yet he faces hostility from Jewish leaders; he is rejected in Nazareth, his home town; and his followers seem tentative in grasping his identity.

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DATE  
Pentecost 11  
Sunday, Aug. 16, 2020

PREACHER  
The Rev. David Griswold

Matthew 15: 10-28

In today's gospel temple leaders challenge Jesus because his disciples eat with unwashed hands. Annoyed with these Pharisees and impatient with his friends, Jesus reminds them that uncleanness in the heart, not unwashed hands, is what defiles people and dishonors God. No wonder there's a mercy shortage—the leaders of this community are more concerned about regulating outward behavior than nurturing God's loving kindness on the inside.

And yet, in the midst of this tension, mercy bursts forth in an unexpected place. Perhaps feeling exasperated, Jesus leaves the region of Galilee and heads into a Gentile area near the coast. He crosses into what Jews consider to be unclean territory among defiled people. The mother who approaches Jesus here is the first woman to speak in Matthew's gospel. Referring to her as a Canaanite, Matthew marks her as an ancient enemy, once so despised and feared that when Israel anticipated occupying its promised land, Moses ordered that with God's help the Canaanites must be wiped out, saying: "You must utterly destroy them...and show them no mercy" (Deut. 7: 2).

For this Canaanite woman in crisis, the last people we might expect her to turn to for signs of mercy would be a group of visiting Israelites. Religious and ethnic differences and her secondary status as a woman in that culture make it improper for her to speak to them. But mercy is now at hand in Jesus, and she is determined to have her share.

We expect Jesus to respond with compassion and grant her request, in a teachable moment for his disciples about how God's mercy transcends human definitions of defilement. But what makes this encounter especially compelling is that it seems also to be a teachable moment for Jesus himself about the power of mercy in motion.

The woman addresses him as "Lord, Son of David" (15: 22) showing she recognizes Jesus as Israel's Messiah. Refusing to answer her, he reminds the disciples that his mission is "only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (15: 24). She falls outside this preferred group, and he seems prepared to ignore her. Undeterred, she kneels before Jesus and keeps pleading, but his aloofness turns to what sounds like hostility—he tells her he can't waste God's mercy on outsiders: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs" (15: 26).

Really? This is not the Jesus we've come to know as one ready to look past narrow views of tradition to demonstrate God's unconditional love for all. This Jesus seems to be disdainful, even insulting. Is he ready to allow ethnic classifications to disqualify outsiders from sharing in the mercy of God?

Last Sunday we watched as Peter, starting to walk on a stormy sea toward Jesus, gets distracted by fear and nearly drowns. Saving him, Jesus gently chides Peter as "you of little faith" (14: 31). Today the Canaanite woman finds herself in a storm but Jesus shows no signs of helping. Rudely dismissed, perhaps hurt and angry, many of us would walk away saying "Wow, I must have had it wrong—I'm not going to receive the healing power of God's mercy through this guy."

But she doesn't quit. Nothing is going to distract her attention from Jesus. Rather than let his belittling comment defeat her, she turns it back on him: "Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." (15: 27). She seems to accept that as a Gentile she won't be among the first to be welcomed into the Kingdom of God. But she knows even the

scraps left over from the mercy banquet will be life-giving to those who are famished for God's love. Perhaps she's heard reports of Jesus' teaching about persistence in prayer, and about what faith the size of a mustard seed can do, and about the few loaves and fishes that fed thousands.

No matter how she's learned it, the woman knows that it will only take a small speck of God's mercy to beat back the demon that torments her daughter. She understands something about the power of God in Jesus that the disciples are still slow to comprehend, and finally Jesus praises her: "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish" (15: 28).

It seems Jesus is learning that the good news of a kingdom ruled by loving kindness cannot be rationed or contained by human boundaries that define who is in and who is out of favor with God. The Canaanite woman is most assuredly in. Jesus is indeed God's mercy in motion and even when he's having a bad day, anyone who comes in faith seeking the loving kindness of God through him can find it.

To follow Jesus means to listen for the call "Have mercy on me, Lord" that resounds in our world, whether in shouts of distress, sighs of sorrow, whispers of discouragement or chants for justice. Much of the time it can seem as if the demand for loving kindness in our lives far outweighs the supply of mercy with which God has equipped us. We may tell ourselves there just isn't enough to go around. We may find ourselves feeling we lack the power or courage to fight the demons that block the light of God around us.

Yet I ask myself: if God's mercy shines through in Jesus even on a bad day, can't a glimmer of it shine through me on a good day? It helps to remember that we're not called to summon forth all the power and courage needed to heal the world's brokenness. We don't have to set God's mercy in motion—Jesus has already done it.

We just need to be open to Jesus' call to love God and relate to our neighbors—to see people's needs, challenges and gifts through Jesus' loving eyes, especially those whose lives might first seem disconnected from ours. Keeping mercy in motion begins with our offering others even a morsel of the loving kindness that is stored within us thanks to our loving God. Those morsels can add up to a banquet.

Thanks be to God.

\*Article cited: Willimon, William, (2010, Pentecost) Falling in Love With Mercy, *Journal for Preachers*, Vol. 33 no. 4, p. 27