

Sermon – Matthew 15:10-28

David R. Lyle

Grace Lutheran Church

11 Pentecost – Year A

16 August 2020

“A Crumbling Kingdom”

Sisters and brothers, friends in Christ, grace be unto you and peace this day, in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. It's one thing for Jesus to be unpredictable. He comes, after all, as the hidden king to upside-down this broken world. Doing what we don't expect is pretty much Jesus' thing. Of course, this is why the good news is good news; if Jesus acted like us, we'd be right back where we started. It's something else entirely for Jesus to act in such a predictable way. We're so used to him doing what we don't expect that it's jarring when he acts like we'd expect someone to behave; when he acts like *we* do. When he hears a woman, a foreigner, an *other* crying out to him for mercy, pleading with him to heal her daughter, and responds with the sort of vitriol we'd expect from ourselves: “It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.” Jesus declares that he has come only for the lost sheep of his own house, not for the stray dogs looking for handouts. And no, there isn't really any way to soften this; no exegetical tricks to demonstrate that “dog” was a term of endearment or that Jesus was just kidding. The preacher Teresa Fry Brown asks, “How can Jesus be so insensitive and hateful to this woman? It reminds me of the ways single mothers are sometimes treated today. I thought Jesus was supposed to love everyone.” Dr. Fry Brown continues, “I was a single, recently divorced black mother raising a daughter, and my heart was pierced by the thought that my sweet, loving Jesus would deny this unnamed woman assistance when her baby was sick. Would he do the same thing to me?”

2. If we find ourselves recoiling at these harsh words from Jesus, I hope we can muster the honesty to see ourselves in his response. Yes, I imagine we can all empathize to some extent with the Canaanite woman; most of us have found ourselves on the outside looking in at some point in our lives. But take a moment to relate to Jesus, judging and condemning this unclean foreign woman. Have we not looked down upon others? Benefitted from the oppression of others? Found our own worth in the diminishment of others?

3. Nevertheless, we might say, she persisted. Mothers, parents, have a way of doing so. While she was not present for the teaching that precedes her encounter with Jesus, she lives it out. She was, as defined by the Law, unclean. Yet Jesus has just made a point of upending the pharisaical understanding of the Law: It's not what you take into your mouth that makes you clean or unclean, it's what comes out. Yes, this woman has spent a lifetime not following Jewish Law, having had no reason to do so. She is, from this perspective, rightly seen as an outsider to be avoided. But she manifests what Jesus has just taught a moment before: "What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart," and what proceeds from her heart and mouth is a cry of faith to the very Jesus who has said he won't listen to her. Her faith overwhelms him. The mercy she seeks is given. Her daughter is healed instantly.

4. What then are we to say? Do we try to soft pedal Jesus' insulting words? I don't think so. Instead, we hear the story from its ending, from which we find hope after discomfort. In Jesus, very much the God who creates heaven and earth and very much a human being, we see the movement from the old world to the new. From the ways of judgment, sin, and death, to hope, salvation, and life. Jesus, you see, does something incredibly divine in this moment. We like to imagine that God is unchanging, and there are ways in which this is true, but God is not static. To not change is such a human value; who, after all, wants to be called a flip-flopper? But to change? That's gospel.

In Christ we see God moving beyond the old Law, overcoming archaic divisions, opening up something new. The gospel is that Jesus takes our worst into himself and does something about it. I suspect that you and I would dig in our heels at this woman in her “Canaanite Lives Matter” t-shirt and tell her to go away. But Jesus listens to her and says, “You believe! Alright, new rules. You’re in, and so’s everybody else.” And when the tension between the old ways in which we live push back too hard against the new thing God is doing? Well, God doesn’t respond by pushing back against people. Instead, Jesus takes that tension between old and new and lets it kill him on Calvary. His resurrected life proclaims the end of border and boundary. Yes, as Paul writes to the Romans, the gifts of God are irrevocable. The promises still hold for God’s people. But now we’re going to redefine what it means to be the people of God. These promises are sure and certain for you, given forever in the waters of baptism that connect you to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

5. In this story we see Jesus live into his bloodline and into the words of the prophets that foretold his coming. Jesus’ lineage is hardly an ode to purity. He is descended from women named Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, outsiders and foreigners all. How could these strong women and their daughters remain excluded from their great-great-grandson’s beautiful new world? And Isaiah proclaimed that the Lord’s house would be a house of prayer for all people. There’s plenty of room on the holy mountain, and Jesus himself is roused in this moment to a fuller understanding of his mission.
6. Jesus, it turns out, is God incarnate for everybody. Loving us, he’s listening to us. He welcomes the insistent love of this woman and hears her for her faith. Will he not hear you? What will you pray for? To be sure, prayer has no guarantees. We cannot bend God’s inscrutable will to our demands. But God is listening. Martin Luther writes, “Our Lord God could not but hear me; for I threw my sack before His door, and wearied his ears with all His promises of

hearing prayers, which I could repeat out of Holy Writ; so that he could not but hear me, if I were ever to trust in his promises.” Or better, in a story related by the preacher Michael Lindvall, there was an employee of an urban congregation who “was mugged while walking his dog, stabbed in the heart, and left to die. By the time the man was brought to the emergency room staff said that there was only a 2 percent chance that he would survive. Members of the church staff gathered around the dying man’s gurney to pray. [The pastor] offered a prayer for peace and acceptance.” However, “At this point one of the church’s custodians began to pray a different kind of prayer. Clarence got in God’s face: ‘You gotta do something, God! You’ve done it for me, now you do it again, right here and now, please.’ The man lived, in fact completely recovered from his wounds.”

7. To be sure, our prayers will not always lead to such outcomes. But Jesus shows us today that God is listening, and then he goes one better. At the end of all our prayers, however they are answered, Jesus invites us to the feast of the Kingdom, a feast so abundant that we will eat our fill as crumbs fall to the ground, a feast in which there is always more to come, in which life follows death. In our house, the rule is that you only get dessert if you’ve eaten everything on your plate. Torsten, our youngest, will often eat his fill and push away his plate. “I’m full,” he’ll proclaim. We’ll say, “I guess you don’t want ice cream tonight, then.” And he’ll respond, “Oh no, it’s just my food hole that’s full. My dessert hole still has plenty of room.” When we have feasted on God’s goodness in this world; when we have fought to share that goodness with others; when our last prayers have been lifted up; when the end draws near; well, at that moment Jesus still has something up his sleeve. He undoes the old condemnation to death. God changes the divine mind, deciding that everlasting life with God’s people is better for all of us, even if we don’t by a long shot deserve it. We aren’t worthy to eat at God’s table, but God’s looking for dinner guests. Jesus breaks himself open upon the altar of the world, his body and blood crumbled on the cross for you. And for me. And

And for those people you don't much like, too. The old world is passing away. The new Kingdom is coming. As it does, we might consider changing our minds about a few things, too; about how we treat our fellow future dinner guests in today's world. So today, we come, pray, and eat. Be you a sheep or a dog, there's plenty to go around. Unexpected as it is, there's always room for more, grace upon grace upon grace. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.