

Lord, have mercy
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Proper 15, Year A

Isa 56: (2-5) 6-7

Ps 67

Rom 11:13-15, 29-2

Matt 15:21-28

In the name of the One God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Good morning! And welcome, to this beautiful place, on this good day. Welcome, and gratitude, and mercy are clearly the themes of this day – welcome to all God's people to worship on this day; welcome to old-timers, and welcome to newcomers; welcome even to me, here in my first weekend as your new Associate Rector. Gratitude for the opportunity to worship together; gratitude for the long road and the extraordinary blessings that have brought me here to the joy of being yours. And gratitude for the gift of mercy, and the working of the Holy Spirit, as we are led into our Gospel lesson today.

... *she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, have mercy on me."*

Lord, have mercy on me. This is a phrase we all know. We have heard it woven through the Psalms; we have heard it in the books of Isaiah and Tobit; we find it in the three synoptic Gospels as well. "Lord, have mercy on me." "Kurios, elehayo" in her tongue; "Kyrie eleison" in the liturgy we know and love so well. Lord, have mercy.

Our Canaanite woman, also known in our stories as the Syrophoenician woman, from two thousand years ago has dropped to her knees with these words on her lips: "Lord, have mercy on me." This desperate mother was out of options. Her daughter was beyond all help - "tormented by demons." So with the strength that only a parent knows for the sake of their child, she rose up out of the bounds of the cultural and societal oppression of her day to come out shouting to Jesus for help, knowing full well that she was not "one of his," not a Jew, not of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. This woman was from the districts of Tyre and Sidon, a Phoenician in the Roman province of Syria. She knew she was completely out of bounds, asking this of a man who was not only devoutly Jewish, but whom she believed to be the very Messiah of the Jews, still she shouted to him "*Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David.*"

Jesus is taken aback by this woman. He recognizes the serious cultural disconnect, and stops to think. Our scripture tells us, "*He did not answer her at all.*" His disciples go back and forth with him urging that he send her away; Jesus, thinking out loud with them, ponders, "*I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.*"

But the woman came to him then and knelt before him, pleading in her tongue, "Kurios, elehayo." Lord, have mercy on me; Kyrie eleison.

Jesus then enters into a disturbing discussion with her. He is moved by her need, but voices his understanding of his call: to serve only "the chosen." He says, in words that jar

us and make us do a double take, “*It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.*” It is hard to think of our Lord describing some people as children and some as dogs! When I read that this was the Gospel passage for my first sermon here as your new Associate Rector, I just took a deep breath and sighed. To me, this is one of the most challenging pieces in our Gospel texts. Could our Lord actually be welcoming some, but excluding others? What’s happening here, on this hot, dusty day in Phoenicia, with this strange woman shouting at him, kneeling for mercy, and his disciples unnerved by the whole scene?

Jesus is at a point of change, of revelation. He is in that moment stretching his understanding as he considers her reply: “*Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.*” She is acknowledging the one Master of all, and is pointing to the fact that all created beings are beloved by the same generous Master. She sees the truth of belonging to the One God, regardless of the fact that she was only a lowly Syrophenician woman. In referring to herself as a dog at her Master’s table, she is acknowledging that the one God, Master of all that is, is her God too. And, even more extraordinary, this woman was catching a glimpse of a new eternity: she is seeing ahead to the day that Jesus the Christ would break open the bounds of heaven, welcoming all to the great Table. She points to God as Master of all, and she points to Jesus as God incarnate when she asks for these crumbs from him, for this healing *from him*.

I love to picture the expression on Jesus’ face at this point, when he realizes that this woman sees the bigger picture! Jesus is stunned by her insight, and welcomes her out from under the table, so to speak: he exclaims, “*Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.*” *And her daughter was healed instantly.*”

How interesting, to think of our Lord in formation, at this mid-point of sorts, and having only an incomplete understanding of his call in the world. You see, believing as we do that Jesus was both fully God and fully man, we understand that he had willingly emptied himself of his divinity at conception, and entered into the experience of being fully human for our sakes. This encounter with the Syrophenician woman stretched him, broke open a boundary he had thought could not be breached. Jesus was in the very human process of growing into his call, and it is this image of him as a growing and suffering human that makes us squirm a little. To wrestle with the understanding of Jesus Christ as fully God and fully human has been the conundrum of theologians for two thousand years, but isn’t it exactly this that should console us? Jesus Christ took on the fullness of what it is to be human, to experience every possible suffering, so that there is no ground on which he hasn’t walked, and will walk, with us.

And on this hot day in Syrophenicia, we are given a glimpse of Christ wrestling with the painful human process of formation. Here we see how even Jesus was required to stretch, to grow into the full scope of his call to serve, just as each one of us is required to grow into the fullest scope of our call to serve. Just as Jesus’ reach *stretched* and widened to embrace the whole of creation - past, present, and future - into his saving arms, welcoming *all* into the kingdom of heaven, we are to widen our reach, and deepen our

welcome, to all who are brave enough to peek in these doors, wondering if they might possibly be welcome at the table too.

Do you remember what it was like, at some point in your life, to be the one who felt they didn't belong; to know you were not included among those who seemed to be "the chosen?" I'm sure that every person here has had to experience that pain to some degree. But fortunately, in God's great design, we know that every suffering bears a gift; every pain gives birth to a blessing. That pain of feeling less than, feeling like the ones only allowed the crumbs under the table, that pain is what gives birth to our need to welcome the stranger, to help the lost ones, to have mercy on those that feel they are "other."

Because, you see, we are all in constant discernment of our call, of how we are to grow into the vision God has of us. This is Kingdom of God stuff; this is what I believe is God's hope for us: the full formation and expression of our gifts; the maturation of our unique identity; and the welcoming of all people into full communion with each other at the Master's table. This is the table in the "*house of prayer for all peoples*," in Hebrew the *bah-yith tefillah*, that Isaiah pointed to in our OT scripture today.

We have such a long way to go – just listening to the news is enough to make us wonder at God's patience with us; it's certainly gives us cause to say out loud, Lord, have mercy. But I say we got a rare glimpse of this Kingdom of God the other night in the opening ceremonies of the Olympics in Beijing. I hope you all were able to see that procession of beautiful children from every nation in the world, all dressed in their glorious native dress – each completely unique, each thrilled to represent their beautiful individuality – and all united in their mutual support, and friendship, and joy. This was a Kingdom of God moment; this was a moment that I think God took delight in.

This Kingdom of God stuff moves me powerfully; it is what has moved me here to this place. It is my great joy to be called to be your new Associate Rector here at St. John's, where welcoming all into God's house of prayer, and welcoming all to God's table into full communion, through Eucharist or blessing, is what we are all about. It will be my joy to join my energy with yours, to help St. John's realize its' vision of the Kingdom of God – diverse, inclusive, joyful, and passionately engaged in the work of welcome, and gratitude, and mercy. Let us support each other in our formation, and in our discernment of God's call to us. Let us remember whenever we say Kyrie Eleison, Lord have mercy, that we are appealing to God for mercy - to give us the strength to welcome the lost, and to empower the found, to be the fullest possible expression of God's design in us: to be Kingdom people, Christ's body in the world.

Amen.

