

Message for the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, Year A (8/16/2020)
Matthew 15:21-28

This is a Sunday for Martin Luther, at least to my mind. Two of the Reformer's insights on the nature of grace and faith emerged as I studied our Gospel from Matthew this week. And, although these ideas may seem at first to be in tension with each other, in true Lutheran fashion, together they capture the significance of the famous exchange between Jesus and the Canaanite woman.

It's usually Jesus who cracks open our assumptions and enlarges our understanding of God's mercy, often in dialogue with someone who represents the status quo. But **in this case, it's Jesus' conversation partner, an unnamed foreigner, who upends the conventional wisdom and gives us a glimpse into God's heart.**

Much has been made of Jesus' reluctance to grant the Canaanite woman's request for mercy on behalf of her child. He responds first with silence, then refusal, and finally rejection: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." This insult captures our attention because it's embarrassing. How can Jesus be so harsh? Commentators have often made an effort to explain away the

discomfort, speculating, for instance, that Jesus is simply testing the Canaanite woman's faith or the faith of his disciples. But, one fact remains: regardless of his motives, Jesus' initial answer to her plea is *no*: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel... It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

"Yes, Lord," the woman replies humbly and brilliantly, "yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." She perceives God's life-giving power flowing through this Son of David, and she refuses to be denied. Her faith is great because **she insists on the breadth of God's mercy, mercy that extends even beyond commonly accepted ethnic or other boundaries.**

This brings us to Luther's first insight. "We are beggars; this is true," he scribbled on a piece of paper and stuffed in his pocket as he lay dying. Luther's was a humble faith, much like that of the Canaanite woman, acknowledging that all good things have their source in God and that God is exceedingly gracious. "We are beggars," Luther affirms, claiming nothing but God's generosity to spread a table to feed all God's beloved with abundance. This conviction underlines both our common need and our common acceptance in God's sight.

“Instead of dividing people between those who have a place at the table and those who get crumbs,” remarks one interpreter, “we have an opportunity to share hospitality with our fellow beggars.”¹ **In God’s mercy, the line between insider and outsider dissolves, leaving behind only gratitude and love.**

Yet, if our faith is humble, it’s also unyielding. **If we are beggars, then we’re also grapplers.** And, this idea we also find in Luther. He relates Jesus’ encounter with the Canaanite woman to the story of Jacob wrestling with the divine stranger on the shores of the Jabbok in Genesis 32. “I will not let you go, unless you bless me,” Jacob says to his mysterious opponent, prompting Luther to ask:

Why do you not let him go [Jacob]? Your thigh is hurt and you are already lame; what will you do? “I feel no weakness,” says Jacob. Who is strengthening you? [And Jacob replies:] “Faith, the promise, and indeed, this weakness of faith.”

Luther goes on to observe:

In this manner God is conquered when faith does not leave off, is not wearied, and does not cease but presses and urges on. So [faith also] makes its appearance in the Canaanite woman with whom Jesus was wrestling when he said: “You are a dog, the bread of the [children] does not belong to you.” The woman did not yield here but offered opposition, saying: “Even the dogs eat

¹ <https://members.sundaysandseasons.com/Home/TextsAndResources/2020-8-16/2119#resources>.

the crumbs that fall from their master's table." And so she was victorious and heard the excellent word of praise: "O woman, great is your faith!"²

We are grapplers; this is true. If God's promise is bold, then we are bold to claim it both for ourselves and for others. If mercy is "the way that God has determined to be God,"³ then we are determined to insist on mercy.

Friends, **we are beggars, and we are grapplers. Faith is a combination of humility and audacity, meekness and persistence.** Even as we cling to the promise of God to grant healing, wholeness, and abundant life, we also demand that life for those who've been deprived of it. And, this requires that we "struggle not only with God but also with our own perceptions of the other"⁴; that we confront our own propensity to erect boundaries between insider and outsider, and allow Christ to break down the dividing wall, all for the sake of God's mercy.

² *Luther's Works* 6:139, as cited by Nelson Rivera in "Freedom in Reading the Scripture," *Journal of Lutheran Ethics*, Vol. 18, Issue 1, January/February 2018, <https://elca.org/JLE/Articles/1220>.

³ Iwan Russell-Jones, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 3, 360.

⁴ M. Eugene Boring, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VIII, 338.