

Pentecost 11A (8/20/17)

Isaiah 56:1, 6-8

Psalm 67

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

Matthew 15:21-28

Organized religion has a long history of placing restrictions on God's mercy. We determine standards for what is acceptable in God's sight, and hold ourselves and others accountable to those standards. But God does not abide by our standards. God overflows human boundaries for the sake of mercy, because mercy is the way that God has chosen to be God.¹ And, since God is not bound by constraints when it comes to mercy, then neither are we.

Most of us were baptized long before we could begin to contemplate what baptism means. But, in my first call I had the privilege of accompanying a young man as he explored the possibility of baptism for himself. He had been raised in a tradition that practiced believer's baptism, which emphasizes a person's choice to come to Christ. But this young man never felt worthy. He never felt faithful enough, or pure enough, or deserving enough for baptism, so he never went through with it. And his early life proved to be a struggle with what seemed like a series of curses – poverty, family crisis, cancer. Yet, by the time I met him, he had begun a successful career, gone into remission, gotten married, and most importantly, had a child. These blessings contradicted his prior suspicion that grace was out of his reach. Could it be, he wondered, that God loved him after all, and that God would welcome him into the communion of saints in spite of his feelings of unworthiness? The answer, of course, was yes. He was baptized on Easter morning with his wife and daughter by his side.

¹ Iwan Russell-Jones, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 3, 360.

Organized religion has a long history of placing restrictions on God's mercy. We determine standards for what is acceptable in God's sight, and we hold ourselves and others accountable to those standards. **Right belief, proper worship, good behavior, conforming identity – these are the criteria for inclusion among the people of God, and those who do not meet them are, at best, grudgingly tolerated, and, at worst, overtly condemned. Consciously or subconsciously, we decide who is and who is not worthy.**

The question of worthiness is at the heart of our Gospel from Matthew today. It's troubling, the story of Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman. Normally, we expect Jesus to be the one to challenge our prejudices and reorient our priorities. But in this story, it is not Jesus but his counterpart who expands our perspective, transgressing conventional boundaries and opening our eyes to new possibilities.² She is the last character we would expect to play a decisive role in the story of a Jewish Messiah – a marginal Gentile woman, a nobody. If Jesus' mission is exclusively to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel," then the gospel simply does not take her into account. Like a pesky figure in the background of a perfect photograph, she doesn't belong in the scene. Hence Jesus' silence in the face of her plea to rid her daughter of a demon. But the dialogue turns even more disturbing when, in response to her persistence, Jesus demeans the woman and her daughter, calling them "little dogs" who are not worthy of "the children's food."

How can he be so callous? It's easy to become preoccupied with Jesus' intent in this encounter. Does he really mean to disparage the woman, reflecting a long

² See Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 324.

history of tension between Israel and Canaan? Or, are his words tongue-in-cheek?³ Is his statement a ploy to measure the strength of the woman's faith? Or, is he testing the disciples' grasp of the extent of his mission? Is it possible that Jesus is simply caught with his compassion down?

The intent behind Jesus' words, however, is less significant than the Canaanite woman's response. An insult almost always engenders resentment, but the woman does not allow hurtful words to derail her effort on behalf of her child. Instead, **she adopts Jesus' depiction of Gentiles and reinterprets it.** Perhaps it isn't fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs, "yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." What humility, to willingly identify with a degrading portrayal of her people, and what boldness, to insist that even the little dogs fall within the master's purview.⁴ **The Canaanite woman refuses to accept that the God of Israel would withhold mercy from people like her – Gentile people, marginal people, nobodies.**

And Jesus is impressed. "Woman, great is your faith!" he praises. It seems that faith involves not only perseverance in the face of adversity, but also the recognition that God is not bound by ethnic, religious, gender, or other barriers. **The Canaanite woman cries out for mercy not on account of her merit, but on account of God's generosity. She understands that God does not abide by human boundaries that separate worthy from unworthy. Instead, God overflows those boundaries for the sake of mercy, because mercy is the way that God has**

³ See Dock Hollingsworth, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 3, 361.

⁴ See Jae Won Lee, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 3, 359.

chosen to be God.⁵ And, by granting the woman's request to heal her daughter, Jesus establishes that in the end there is neither Jew nor Gentile, there is neither man nor woman, there is neither worthy nor unworthy, but all are one in the love of God in Christ.⁶

Dear church, *you* are worthy. You are worthy not because of who you are, but because of who God is. We are all begging for crumbs from the master's table, but we trust that the meal is abundant enough to include everyone. And, since God is not bound by constraints when it comes to mercy, then neither are we. There is enough to go around, so we welcome any and all to partake. There *is* a place at the table for the Canaanite woman among us - the neglected outsider, the nobody. There *is* a place at the table for the young man who never believed he was worthy of baptism, yet who eventually discovered grace as a gift. There *is* a place at the table for each and every one of us. Thanks be to God!

⁵ Russell-Jones.

⁶ See Galatians 3:28