

Pentecost 11A. August 20, 2017. Dungeness Valley Lutheran Church, Sequim, WA. Isaiah 56:1, 6-8, Psalm 67, Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32.

Matthew 15:21-28 Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. 22Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.' 23But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, 'Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.' 24He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' 25But she came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me.' 26He answered, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' 27She said, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.' 28Then Jesus answered her, 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.' And her daughter was healed instantly.

There's a sick girl or young woman.

There's her desperate mother.

There's Jesus, far from his home, perhaps seeking refuge.

There are Jesus' disciples who sense his need for rest and see Gentiles as outsiders.

And we are there.

We meet in a Mediterranean shore area far to the northwest of Jerusalem. There was no love lost between Jews and the Gentile residents of the place, part of modern-day Lebanon. The Jews had driven the Canaanites out of the "Promised Land" under Joshua some 1200 years earlier. This has not been forgotten. Some Jews called the Canaanites "dogs" and dogs in that day, as in many middle-eastern countries today, are considered dirty, and are almost never kept as pets.

Sounds shockingly familiar to us who grieve today's Middle East embroiled in war and unrest. Shockingly familiar to us who grieve the racist protests in Charlottesville and elsewhere.

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Jesus and his friends are strangers in a hostile land; they will keep their distance and they expect the people there to do so also. But this Canaanite woman comes and oversteps the boundaries of nationality and gender, social status and just plain good manners. To Jesus' disciples, a

Gentile woman approaching a Jewish rabbi was absolutely unthinkable. They would put her in her place.

But the woman has a daughter who is tormented. Have you a child or grandchild who suffers from mental or physical illness? I pray no harder for anyone than for a child who struggles. Are you or do you know a neighbor or family member afflicted with a life-threatening condition? Most of us can answer YES. How desperate are our cries, "Lord, help!"

When you hear the stories of starvation, war, shootings and unemployment, do you cry out, "Lord, help those people!" When you write a check for World Hunger, do you pray, "Lord have mercy"? When you see political stalemates in our Congress, do you beg, "Give us just some crumbs from the table of wisdom and statesmanship?"

The foreign woman will shout, she will kneel, she will beg, and she will even give a strong testimony to Jesus' uncomfortable words. She just wants healing for her daughter.

Now here I have to admit that I wish Matthew would have moved right from the dismissing disciples to the healing without this talk of dogs and crumbs from the table.

But Matthew had a point to make: Jesus changes his mind; he widens his healing horizons. He heals the daughter, the daughter of a non-Jewish woman. This woman understood what the household of Israel had yet to grasp: Jesus is hope for all the world. She did not remain silent; she cried out, "See me! See me as a person, not as a woman or a Canaanite or a minority or a foreigner or a person of color or someone from a different religion or as a burden. See me as a person, a child of God."

If Jesus could be changed, can we? We could make a long list of people we see as different — different race, different customs, different religion, different social status. Since 9/11, many in the United States have come to see Muslims as the Canaanites of today. Some have called for a ban on building mosques in the U.S.

The tragic demonstrations in Charlottesville show that our generation still has many who want America kept only for themselves – no other races than white, no other religion than their so-called Christianity. These hostile forces not only want separation, but desire destruction of "the other." Such

beliefs sicken people of faith, sicken you and me. Our small group discussions have shown how much this congregation values openness and inclusion of all people.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) calls racism a sin, a sin that fractures both church and society. Our church believes that cultural, ethnic and racial differences should be seen and celebrated as what God intends them to be—blessings rather than means of oppression and discrimination.

Our presiding Bishop, Elizabeth Eaton, said this week, “We recognize that the kind of violence we witnessed in Charlottesville last weekend is very real and affects all of us. We need to stand up firmly against racism and anti-Semitism, show up for and advocate with others. Jesus, who makes visible those who are invisible, is already there. We need to show up, and we need to listen in each of our communities.”

Today’s Gospel story shows that God’s healing love is for all people. Period.

Matthew began his gospel with a list of Jesus’ Jewish forebears. He ended his book with the statement, “Go into all the world, making disciples of all nations.” In between, Jesus teaches his disciples about the kingdom of God. Matthew leads his readers from inward-looking national pride to worldwide inclusivity.

Matthew put today’s story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman right in the middle of his gospel. That shows its importance. It’s a turning point. The early Jewish Christians argued about whether to let Gentiles into the church. This story showed them that Jesus’ love is universal, beyond ethnic and gender and social and behavioral barriers. This story echoes Isaiah, in our first lesson, who proclaimed that God’s house is “a house of prayer for all peoples”.

Eventually the early church decided to include Gentiles. As the inclusive early church grew more powerful, however, some forgot the lesson. Some came to hate Jews, to silence women, to concur with the slave trade, to despise and slaughter native peoples. Many remained silent during the holocaust in Europe; some built worship spaces that people in wheelchairs could not enter. Some continue attitudes of racism to this day; some forget to practice hospitality to refugees. Some churches exclude people from Holy Communion, people in need of meeting the Christ, people who need forgiveness and comfort.

Today's story can re-direct us to Matthew's lesson for the infant church. We can learn and KNOW that God's love is for all people. And, more importantly, we can LIVE THAT WELCOME. Here at church we seek to make visitors comfortable. At home we talk over the day and speak the Gospel truths to future generations: all people are worthy of respect and attention to justice in God's eyes. When our friends laugh at a racist or sexist joke, we speak up, "That's not the kind of joke I appreciate. You can do better." We stand up for someone from any minority or for anyone being bullied by another.

Jesus and the disciples initially treated the desperate Canaanite woman like an outsider. We are like her when we take stock of our lives, our troubles, our sins, when we feel like outsiders. Like her, a beggar before God, we all have needs spoken or unspoken.

That's when Jesus reaches out to us with God's grace. That's when Jesus proclaims, "Your sins are forgiven." That's when Jesus releases our demons, wipes our tears, heals our brokenness. He doesn't ask who we are, how we look, what we have done, or how we feel.

God's grace is available to all who drive past our church on Sunday and cannot express their needs. How we wish they would turn into the driveway and feel welcome here! God's grace comes to each of God's children who desire it: healing today and every new day. Pray for this and give thanks that it is granted! Amen.