

Pentecost 11A August 16 2020
Matthew 15:21-28
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth
Greg Bensted

Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Jesus left Gennesaret and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just 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." But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly. Let's pray:

Jesus loves me! this I know,
for the Bible tells me so;
Little ones to him belong,
They are weak but he is strong:

*Yes, Jesus loves me;
Yes, Jesus loves me;
Yes, Jesus loves me:
The Bible tells me so.*

Jesus loves me! He who died
Heaven's gate to open wide;
He will wash away my sin,
Let his little child come in:

*Yes, Jesus loves me;
Yes, Jesus loves me;
Yes, Jesus loves me:
The Bible tells me so.*

Jesus loves me! loves me still,
Though I'm very weak and ill;
From his shining throne on high
Comes to watch me where I lie:

Yes, Jesus loves me;
Yes, Jesus loves me;
Yes, Jesus loves me:
The Bible tells me so.

Jesus loves me! He will stay
Close beside me all the way;
When at last I come to die
He will take me home on high:

Yes, Jesus loves me;
Yes, Jesus loves me;
Yes, Jesus loves me:
The Bible tells me so.

Text: Anna Bartlett Warner 1827-1915, alt.
Tune: Jesus loves me, W.B. Bradbury 1816-1868

Most of us know this song well. It describes the Jesus of our childhood, the Jesus of our growing up. It's simple. It's easy. It's lovely. It invokes images of a sentimental faith and a sweet, cuddly Jesus. They're images we so desperately cling to. That's how we want the world to be, the way we want to live, and who and how we want Jesus to be. Why?

Because the world isn't the way we want it to be; the way we want to live is marred by sin, and as such, that's who and how we *need* Jesus to be. And the good news is: That's who and how Jesus is. Jesus stands in stark contrast to the hardness of this world and the cruel deprivations of sin. This Jesus is the One who utters the beautiful invitation in Matthew [19], Mark [10], and Luke [18]: "Let the little children come to me."

- Look at the pictures of the devastation in Lebanon. Listen to the pleas for help, the anger, and the suffocating sense of hopelessness.
- Calculate the cost of wars.
- Study history.
- Walk among the homeless.
- Count those whom we serve through LCC.
- Visit the dying in the Lyell McEwin and talk to their surviving family, or the alcoholic struggling to get well.
- Balance the family budget, work full-time, raise your children, be faithful in your marriage, and while you're at it, remember to eat well and exercise.

You all know what it's like. Life is neither simple nor easy. We need a saviour who can overcome death, devastation, and demons; we need a saviour who can tend our torment and give us hope. We need Jesus, *the Saviour*.

We've all grown up since the days of singing "Jesus loves me!" but maybe our faith needs to grow down. What I mean is, as adults, we become hardened by the scars and bruises of life's battles. Consequently, we tend to compartmentalise Jesus and faith, engaging them as a temporary ceasefire, a momentary pause for peace, before re-entering the fray. We give Jesus a fleeting salute before slogging away on our own again.

By contrast, children enjoy a simple, receptive faith that accepts Jesus as their lovely, kind-hearted, sweet, gentle friend who calls his Father, Abba, Daddy. They trust that Jesus does what they sing about and that he will always be by their side.

This is how the Canaanite woman in today's gospel sees Jesus. She's not one of the chosen people. She's an outsider that the insiders don't want to be around. She's a woman in a society in which women have no real value or standing. She's one of them, not one of us. She bears many battle scars. And yet, the Canaanite woman knows who

Jesus is and believes that Jesus loves her. Against seemingly insurmountable odds, when most would give up, she just keeps presenting herself to Jesus.

I crave for just a mustard seed's worth of this woman's faith.

There are days that I pray and get no answer. I come before God and offer all that I am and all that I have. I give him thanks, pray for mercy, present my needs, beg, and nothing happens. I wait. I listen. God is silent. It feels like I'm talking to the wall sometimes. I get frustrated. I could easily give up.

What do we do when that happens? Where do we go? Do we give up? Get mad? Quit the church? Sometimes someone will come to me and ask, "Why? Why is God silent? Why am I ignored?" I wish I knew. I don't have an answer. So, I do the only thing I can do. "Keep praying," I say. "Just show up. Regardless of what you think God does or doesn't do, you show up."

That's what the Canaanite woman does. She shouts out, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." Jesus doesn't respond. She could go home, argue, or ask, "Why?" But she doesn't. Instead, she moves closer to Jesus, kneels before him, and begs saying, "Lord, help me." This woman seemingly ignored and rejected by Jesus moves deeper into his silence, closer to his presence, and begs. She continues to show up trusting that somehow, it's enough to just be there before him. At some point he will act. She doesn't know when or what he will do. She only knows that she'll be there when Jesus does do something.

This time he answers. "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Hold on a minute! Is Jesus really calling the Canaanite woman a dog? The words sound harsh, mean, wrong. They are and many people try to explain them away because they're embarrassed to think Jesus could say such a thing. It certainly seems out of character for Jesus. The reality is, no one really knows.

I think Jesus is speaking more broadly; making a comment on the reality of the world in which we live. Some have while many do not. Some are in and others are out. For some, life flourishes. Others struggle to survive each day.

That's the world in which we must pray, the world in which we must live our faith, the world in which we must learn to keep showing up. That's the world in which Jesus and this Canaanite woman meet. Life is neither simple nor easy.

The woman knows this. She even agrees with Jesus. "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." She finds another way to show up even when it seems everyone and everything is against her. This time Jesus speaks and acts. "Great is your faith," he tells her. That very hour her daughter is healed.

I don't know why Jesus is portrayed this way. I don't think it's important for us to work it out. But I do think it's important to learn from the Canaanite woman and just keep turning up and engaging with the struggle. Life is difficult. Deep, abiding faith is a real struggle. The world is broken and divided into children and dogs. On the dog days of life all we can do is continue to show up. God may or may not do what we want. It doesn't really matter. To not show up is to struggle alone. To turn away means to miss it when God does act. On the children days of life, we will experience the relief of healing, hear the words of forgiveness, and see the acts that transform and give life. We will be invigorated and we will sing with childlike confidence and hope, "Jesus loves me! this I know." Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.