

Pentecost 11: Isaiah 56:1, 6-8, Psalm 67, Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32, Matthew 15:21-28

INTRO

Well, thank you for taking the time to listen to this message for today, the 11th Sunday of Pentecost. I've just returned from my holidays — it's always great to get away for a little while, to rest, & to play, but it's also good to be back, & I'm excited about this new year ahead of us as a congregation. We are still not meeting together on Sunday mornings, but regardless, it is good to take the time each week to slow down, to pause, & to worship God who has been so faithful and generous to us even when the circumstances of our lives aren't ideal. If you haven't already done so, please take the time to read the lessons for today — they are Isaiah 56:1, 6-8, Psalm 67, Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32, & Matthew 15:21-28. You can pause this recording, read the lessons, and then resume if you'd like.

DOGS AT THE TABLE

Well, I got back from summer holidays this week, and when I went back to the office I took a look at the lessons assigned for today & did a quick double take — these are some tricky passages to tackle right out of the gates — especially the Romans, & Matthew passages! We've got Paul writing in Romans that "God has bound everyone over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all" (Romans 11:32), which sounds really puzzling. And then in our Gospel lesson we have a story of Jesus ignoring a woman, seemingly unwilling to respond to her despite her cries for help. He even calls her a dog, saying that we don't throw our kids' food to the dogs. There's nothing like easing yourself back into things as you get back from some time away, but here goes...

Now I don't know all that much about the world in which Jesus lived, but in some ways it sounds pretty different from things today. I know that we're not supposed to feed dogs people food, but come on, I'm sure we've all done it. A quick Google search of "dogs at the table" gets you some pretty weird pictures of people dressing their pets up in clothes & sitting them at a dining room table set with fine china — and I want to know, who does stuff like that?!? If

you've been known to dress your pets up in people clothes & then sit them at the table to eat, the phone number for my office is 742-3211 — you'd better give me a call so we can book a counselling session, because something about that's just not right...

But even if you're not dressing your pets up, probably more often than we'd like to admit, our pets eat scraps from our tables — even if it's from kids sneaking some food under the table to the dog when no one's looking. My father-in-law, a life-long farmer who has always eaten beef from his own farm, is notorious for pulling out steaks & pots roasts for the dogs when the dog food is running low. He is completely unaware what the cost of a steak is in the grocery store — if he did know I don't think he'd be giving it to the dogs.

We don't have a dog at our house, but a cat, & every once in a while when Owen gets up from the table to go to the bathroom or something, the cat jumps up to his spot & sits in his chair, & the kids laugh pretending that Owen has turned into a cat when we weren't looking. But don't you worry, it doesn't take long for me to chase that cat off our chair — no animals at our table! We can be pretty lenient about these things sometimes, but not in Jesus' day — there was no giving their food to the dogs back then!

GOD'S HEART FOR THE NATIONS

As bizarre as this story seems at first, as uncomfortable as it is when we listen to Jesus' harsh conversation with this woman, this is really a story about prayer, about pleading with Jesus for help in our need, and it's about God's heart for all the nations of the world. And this is echoed throughout our lessons today. In Isaiah God says about the nations:

“These I will bring to my holy mountain,
 and make them joyful in my house of prayer;
 their burnt-offerings and their sacrifices
 will be accepted on my altar;
 for my house shall be called a house of prayer
 for all peoples.” —Isaiah 56:7

Luther remarked about this passage that in it God is saying,

“I will not stop gathering, because they do not stop being scattered. Satan does not stop scattering, and so I will not stop gathering.” —Luther, *LW*, vol. 17, p.264, quoted by Glenn Monson, <http://gluthermonson.blogspot.com/>, accessed August 11, 2020.

It's God's heart to gather the peoples of the world to himself, & that's exactly what he's doing — he is at work in the world. The entirety of our Psalm today echoes this notion as well, which concludes,

“...so that all the ends of the earth will fear him.” —Psalm 67:7

Matthew tells us that the woman who approached Jesus was a Canaanite — an ancient enemy of the people of Israel. And while the Jewish people harboured prejudice against non Jews, Jesus' heart was to reach out to all people — he had already responded to a Roman centurion earlier in the book (Matthew 8), healing the centurion's servant. So his apparent coldness towards this woman shouldn't be taken as genuine — Jesus is using this encounter to expose the disciples' own prejudice, & to teach a lesson in faith.

SILENCE

That lesson however, isn't an easy one. The lady approaches Jesus, crying out,

“Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon.”
—vs. 22

It's remarkable that even though she's not Jewish, she seems to know exactly who Jesus is. And Matthew reports that Jesus “did not answer her a word” (vs. 23).

Now, we ought to let that sentence hang in the air for a few moments — Jesus responded to her deep need with silence. Do you know what this feels like? Have you ever felt that your prayers were met with God's silence? We may have any sort of desperate need in our lives — financial insecurity or loss of work because of the economic shutdown, tensions in our marriages, fights with our kids or relatives, the cloud of depression, hopelessness, & loneliness hovering over us day after day. In the face of whatever plagues us & keeps us awake at night, God's silence is hard to take — we've all prayed prayers & not heard answers, and I bet we can all identify with this woman. There's a great novel, by the way, that I've recommended before

called *Silence*, by a Japanese author Shusaku Endo that deals with this very issue — Martin Scorsese made it into a film a couple of years ago — an incredible story about the suffering of Japanese Christians some 400 years ago.

THE REDEEMING CHARACTERISTICS OF SILENCE

I can't begin to explain why sometimes our troubles are met with God's silence. But here's the thing about Jesus' silence in this story — it does something — it draws out the woman's faith. Every time she is faced with an obstacle she desperately continues to seek Jesus. Her daughter's demon possessed — she pleads with Jesus. Jesus doesn't answer — she pleads with Jesus. The disciples try to have her sent away — she pleads with Jesus. She pleads with Jesus because she's got faith.

There's a sense in which silence can in fact be good for us — it draws out our desperate faith. That's one of the reasons why we intentionally create spaces for silence in our worship services — specifically in our order of confession. Silence gives voice to our need.

We often talk in the church about how the Gospel is good news, it's a message — a word communicated about the goodness of God and how he's come to save us through the death & resurrection of his Son Jesus. But you don't come to receive that message unless you've come to terms with your need first. Pastor & author Frederick Buechner says this:

“Before the Gospel is a word, it is silence... It is life with the sound turned off so that for a moment or two you can experience it not in terms of the words you make it bearable by but for the unutterable mystery that it is. Let him say, ‘Be silent and know that I am God, saith the Lord’ (Ps. 46:10). Be silent and know that even by my silence and absence I am known. Be silent and listen to the stones cry out.” —Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth*, 23.

Silence gives voice to our need & draws out our desperate faith.

GOSPEL

In the end Jesus does respond. She is worthy, this woman, even though she's a Gentile, a Canaanite, a woman — a trifecta of worthlessness in that culture. She's worthy of the scraps

from his table. She's worthy not because of anything she's done, or anything she is, but simply because she trusts Jesus and he loves her. There's another pastor & author who says,

“Faith believes Jesus is good even when reason is not so sure.” —Dale Bruner, *Matthew*, vol. 2, 101.

Faith says, “Come what may, I'll bring my needs & requests to Jesus' feet, & let him do what he chooses to do with them, trusting in him, leaning on him in all things.”

There's an old, old prayer used in the communion liturgy of the Anglican church from 1548, called the *Prayer of Humble Access*. Just before receiving communion, everyone would pray it together, & it goes like this:

“We do not presume to come to this thy Table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table. But thou art the same Lord whose property is always to have mercy. Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of thy dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us. Amen.”

Did you catch the image in that prayer? It draws from this gospel story, recognizing that we are that Canaanite woman unworthy of eating the scraps from God's table. Sometimes people refrain from going up for communion, feeling that they aren't worthy of it, but the truth is that none of us are worthy of it — it's precisely in our unworthiness that Jesus offers himself for us. Our worth doesn't come from externals (what we do or accomplish), nor is it inherited (in our ethnicity or family background), our worth is given to us from a God who loves us, wants to heal us, & answer our every prayer.

There's a Joshua in the OT who kills God's enemies, the Canaanites. But here is given to us a New Joshua — Jesus (the name is the same in Hebrew by way) who doesn't reach out to smite us Canaanites down, but to heal us and save us by offering his own life for us on the cross. So when your prayers are met with silence, don't receive that as a sign of God's rejection of you — don't you believe it for one moment! Instead, ask God what he is wanting to do within us through that silence. Allow it to foster a recognition of our deep need of his mercy, and to draw out our faith, that we might lean on him more and more and more. Amen.