

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
August 14, 2014  
Tenth Sunday After Pentecost  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 56:1-7  
Psalm 67  
Romans 11:13-32  
Matthew 15:21-28

A couple weeks ago, we explored in the sermon the question, “How far does the love of God reach in our lives?”

Today, we pursue a similar question from Matthew’s Gospel, as Jesus attempts to seclude himself and to spend time alone in prayer. In this case, he is in a geographically significant location. He has moved to the region of Tyre and Sidon. This region was populated by “foreigners,” by outsiders, by those not part of the children of Israel. The relationship between these people and the children of Israel was characterized by animosity, and even bitter hatred. If you were part of the covenant people, the preferred and often-used term of contempt for these foreigners was (ironically) *dogs*.

The text tells us that Jesus is approached by a Gentile woman whose daughter is very ill. She comes to Jesus and pleads with him, “Have mercy on me, Lord.” The words she uses are words you find in our folder each week. She pleads with Jesus, “*kyrie eleison*,” or “Lord, have mercy.”

When Jesus doesn't reply, his disciples plead with him and urge him to send her away. Their insistence sounds in the Greek very close to the sound of the woman's plea. They say to Jesus, "*apolyson,*" or "tell her to leave."

It's almost as if you have two competing choruses being sounded. There is *eleison*, the cry for mercy, and there is *apolyson*, the cry of the bouncers who stand guard at the door to keep out the riff-raff. There is *eleison*, the cry for help from a heart in pain; and there is *apolyson*, the cry of the old guard that says, "check the I.D., check the pedigree, check to make sure that she is "true blue". Never mind her humanity -- just make sure she is *our* kind of people."

So here is a woman, an outsider, a foreigner -- a "dog" as it were, pleading for Jesus to help her. Her pleas are countered strongly by voices that say, "she's not one of us. She's a piece of white Gentile trash. Get her the heck out of here."

In the midst of these competing voices comes the \$64,000 question: *How far does the mercy of God reach?*

Well, if we take Jesus' response to this woman seriously, apparently not very far. His first response to her question is not to answer her question at all. Her pain appears to go unacknowledged. If the opposite of love is not hatred, but indifference, then this encounter is off to a bad start, to say the least.

After his disciples tell Jesus to send her away, he says to her, "I was sent only to help the people of Israel -- God's lost sheep -- not the Gentiles" (v. 24).

Now let's just stop the car for a minute here. Take a deep breath.

Consider our other Scripture lessons this morning. Consider Isaiah's vision of pilgrims gathering for prayer, among them Gentiles and *Eunuchs*. Consider the Psalmist, who prays for God's saving health to be known among all "nations," a term that designated foreigners and outsiders. And consider Paul's lengthy conversation with the church at Rome.

Now let's go out further, beyond the context of our lessons for this morning. Consider what you know about the rest of the Old and New Testaments. Consider the story of Jonah, from which we read last week. Consider God's compassion to the brutal and murderous Ninevites.

Consider the Apostle Peter's experience in the Book of Acts, where he has a dream which teaches him to say, "I now know that God shows no favoritism, but accepts people from every "nation" who fear Him and do what is right."

Consider the wise men from the East who travel more than a thousand miles after Jesus' birth in order to worship him and offer him gifts.

Consider Jesus' pedigree, which includes Rahab and Ruth, two women who would have been branded as "dogs."

We could continue to cite examples with a list so long it would stretch from here out the door this morning.

So let me ask you something: When Jesus says to this woman, “I was sent only to help the people of Israel -- do you *really* believe that?”

Nevertheless, we have Jesus’ words right here in front of us. So what’s going on?

The context of this story, and of the rest of Scripture, tells us that Jesus’ words here do not reflect *his* belief, but rather the attitude and belief of the *disciples*. He is parroting *their* belief, and the encounter with this woman becomes a foil by which Jesus can turn their thinking upside down and help them see that God’s mercy reaches and extends far beyond their puny and prejudiced boundaries. This whole encounter is Jesus’ attempt to get the disciples to stop singing *apolyson*, and to start singing *eleison*.

It is probably not a coincidence that as Matthew writes his Gospel, there were some in the faith community to whom he writes who were struggling to accept those who were “outsiders,” those who were different, whose background, ethnicity, and politics were different from theirs.

It is also interesting that prior to this in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus has chided the disciples three times for their lack of faith (cf. 8:26; 14:31; 16:8). Here, they witness a great act of faith. But what is the source of that faith? The source of that faith is a “dog.” That faith comes from the most unlikely person in the most unlikely of circumstances.

## **How far does the mercy of God reach?**

Perhaps I should ask this question in a more pointed and practical way this morning: *How far does the mercy of God reach at Epworth Chapel on the Green?*

And here's how I would answer that question. The mercy of God at Epworth reaches *only as far as we allow it to*, because in practical terms God's mercy is communicated to others *through* us. It doesn't fall from the sky in a vacuum.

As we come to the Lord's Table this morning, let us open our hearts to the love and mercy of God that tenderly moves us to see with *God's* eyes and heart. Truly this morning, we are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under his table.

And yet, do you remember the words that come next?

*But You are the same Lord, whose nature is always to have mercy.*

So come with faith, and open yourself to the wide expanse of that mercy.

And then rise and go forth, and let it flow to others.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.