

**“Lord, have mercy”**

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**St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky**

**11th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 15C) – 2 August 2020**

This morning, as we continue to live and move in a restrictive and unfamiliar reality, we are privy to a teaching of Jesus on the issue of ritual purity and virtue. Jesus proclaims that the words and deeds we put out into the world are far more prone to defile us than any food we might consume or any secular culture we might assimilate. Jesus invites his listeners to consider not what they choose to eat or drink or how many times they ritually purify themselves, but rather to look at their own actions and evaluate their own words for signs of spiritual good or spiritual evil. To a culture that defined social roles, ethnic identity, and even sectors of its economy through which foods and which actions and which people were forbidden, this proclamation came as a shock, and to the Pharisees, Jesus’s words brought great offense. When the hurt feelings and discontent of the Pharisees are shared with him, Jesus doubles down. Rather than reframing his words in a more palatable, polite form, Jesus resorts to literal potty language, with no patience for delicacy. Jesus will not let his followers slide until they understand the seriousness of what he is saying. It is our actions and our words, the things that come from the heart of who we are, that define us. It is what impulses and biases we choose to act on, and whether we speak truly or choose to bear false witness, that defile us. This is a serious and controversial claim that Jesus is making, and the implications and cultural ramifications of it have been expounded upon for millennia. This is the sort of claim that incited Jesus’s opponents to violence against him, and continued to complicate relationships between Jewish and Gentile followers in the early church. This exchange alone could occupy a preacher for weeks. But this conversation between Jesus and his disciples is not alone. It resides within the whole narrative of the Bible, the whole narrative of the Gospel of Matthew, the whole narrative of this morning’s lection. Matthew the Evangelist follows this exchange immediately with another exchange, one that is even more complicated and unexpected.

“Lord, help me.” The cry of a nameless Canaanite mother pierces through this dense and heavy section of the Gospel according to Matthew. “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me.” Her words ring through many layers of meaning and reverberate back through the surrounding text. Kyrie eleison. Lord, have mercy. This phrase is repeated in our liturgies and in our sacred music, and shows up throughout our prayerbook and our scriptures. The psalmist returns to this phrase many times, and several sick and injured people call out to Jesus this way in the New Testament. Lord, have mercy. The woman who cries out to Jesus in this way is a Canaanite woman, a person separated from him by gender, by ethnicity, by culture and religion. Jesus is known to her as a powerful healer, one who is favored by God and able to work miracles. By crying out to him, she reaches across every divide that has been constructed between them, and appeals to the most basic of truths. She is a mother. He is a son. Her child is hurting. He has the power to change that. Lord, have mercy.

But Jesus does not do what we expect. Her first plea is met with silence. Nevertheless, she persists. She raises her voice, shouting and crying out to the one person she knows can accomplish this miracle she seeks. Still, Jesus does not behave the way we expect or even hope he might. Worse even than silence, he responds to her with exclusion. "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." As a Canaanite, this woman does not belong to that flock. Still, she is not deterred. Again, Jesus reacts not with the open armed welcome we expect from him, but a challenge and even an insult. Who does she think she is? But this humble mother knows that who she is isn't relevant. Kneeling before the Son of God, all that matters is who HE is. A son of David, a member of the chosen people of God, a fellow child created in God's own image. Jesus's identity as the Messiah of Israel does not only have meaning within the Jewish community. Israel, as the chosen people of the covenant, does not reap the sole benefits of this special relationship to the God who created the universe. Lord, have mercy.

The nameless Canaanite woman, the desperate outsider, understands something fundamental about God's self, and persists in the belief that she can receive God's mercy, not because of who she is, but because of who God is. Jesus sees in her the truth about himself, and is astounded and overjoyed by her faithfulness. The mercy she seeks is an answered prayer, a miraculous healing for a helpless and beloved child. In this anonymous woman, we see every child of God who has ever fallen to their knees in prayer, begging into the silence for an answer, a miracle, a return to wholeness. The Christian life is punctuated by these moments of mercy, by the unbelievable truth that the abundant love of God is greater than our differences.

Kyrie eleison. Lord, have mercy. In this simple prayer, this mother teaches us what it means to live a life undefiled. If words and actions of hatred and violence and evil are what defile, as Jesus tells us, then this single phrase reveals the root of holiness. Mercy. Mercy for ourselves, for the ones we love, for the stranger and the outsider and even the enemy. Prayers springing forth like wheat sown in good soil, rooted in mercy and reaching heavenward. Miracles of healing in body and mind that can only come from a God whose property it is always to have mercy. Living a life of mercy is in direct opposition to the evil actions Jesus warned against, because those actions can only be taken with merciless disregard for the impacts we might have on others. To live a life of mercy is to live a life of inextricable connection, hearts bound to one another in faith. If we are to live this life as we are called to, we must start with the same persistent prayer. Lord, have mercy. What follows is miraculous.