

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

It is often said after a brief encounter with people of prominence or said about celebrities when we encounter them, that “they’re just like us.” A lot of time this is said with a sense of arrogance and self-satisfaction because it shows that I have met this well-known person and this gives us a brief moment of power over others who have not. But this evaluation is based on a very brief encounter. Yes, they may be just like us in so many and various ways but do we really have a sense of a person in a brief encounter? Ironically though, when we find out that they are really just like us, it usually happens when the adoring eyes of the public see them fall in scandal from their esteemed lofty heights. We love success stories of rags to riches, but we love the stories of the fall even more. And we love that we can elevate ourselves by claiming the moral high ground by stepping on those who have just stumbled and fell with our self-aggrandizing-morality.

In our somewhat brief encounter with God and God’s mercy breaking into our world in the person of Jesus Christ, we don’t say he’s just like us...but we make him just like us in our human efforts to express God’s purpose. But our assumptions about God and about God’s purpose in Jesus Christ is not absolute.

I believe that if I were to ask anyone here present today to describe Jesus, our descriptions, for the most part, would probably involve images that are based on, or undergirded by, a caring and loving Jesus with a gentle and caring soul. I believe that our image sees Jesus as the epitome of kindness and compassion; after all, He is the way, the truth, and the life. Our physical descriptions of Jesus would be that of a white, handsome, light-haired man with a well-groomed beard, long white robe, and sandals. Our descriptions would *NOT* be wrong because they would reflect ourselves and how we interpret Jesus. Very few of us sitting here today would see a black man with nappy hair or an olive-skin man with dark hair and a thick beard because these descriptions do not reflect any of us gathered here in this place.

But how do we factor in this description of Jesus in this Gospel text we have today? This Jesus we encounter today would not factor in because we ignore this Jesus or we just simply disregard this Jesus because we are unable to figure out and explain his behavior and so, we are uncomfortable with it. This is a brutal exchange between Jesus and this Canaanite woman, who is a Gentile, coming to Jesus and asking Him to heal her daughter. This brutal exchange between Jesus and this woman may just shatter our image of Jesus. If our image is not shattered it may be a bit altered because we have drawn our conclusions about Jesus, and about how Jesus ought to behave. Oddly enough, Jesus reveals for us how our assumptions about salvation and God’s mercy can rudely stand in the way of divine compassion and human faith not just in his rude reaction to the Canaanite woman, but also with the offended Pharisees who see their traditional laws as absolute.

I will say this, that if this were to happen today and this video clip or sound bite would hit the internet and the evening news, Jesus would be cast out, publicly defamed, and his reputation, all the healings, and all the good that he has done would be totally destroyed, disregarded, and canceled by this one seemingly offensive encounter. But is it really offensive...some would be quick to say...yes!...burn it all down! Even though we know that throughout the entire Gospel, Jesus immediately responds to anyone who cries out to him for mercy or salvation or healing...and

the one-time Jesus is totally human he is destroyed. Is this really how grace works? Or is this how we see grace working? This encounter today is the ONLY instance in the Gospels where Jesus ignores a person who approaches him in need.¹ And we struggle with this because this revealed “humanness” of Jesus just doesn’t fit into our assumed theological paradigms about Jesus. This is NOT the Jesus I know and love! This is not the Jesus we encounter...the Jesus who is just like us...or is it?

Looking at the grace to ignore and overlook this one rude incident about Jesus, would we be willing to overlook the rudeness that others have shown us? Nonetheless, within our divisive and conflicted culture today Jesus would be destroyed through the media by public opinion by this one somewhat brief encounter, and the fullness of Jesus and who Jesus is would have no bearing on it all.

Meanwhile, while this sort of thing goes on, and occurs around us today, our minds are made up, we can sit safely in our congregations, and profess our understanding of God’s love, our understanding of the grace of Jesus Christ and claim with the utmost reassurance that our souls are good to go because we have faith and we convince ourselves and like-minded folks, the world just doesn’t get it...and we are safe in here. But do we really see the fullness of God sitting in here with our like-minded friends of faith? Or do we merely cement our assumptions and understandings by what we pick and choose about God and what we think we know about God’s mercy and disregard and ignore the vast reality of it?

Over the last few weeks I have been focusing on the human behavior of Jesus, showing that Jesus in some ways is just like us...he seeks his solitude in the face of tragedy and over the last few weeks we have seen that Jesus is, in some ways at times, literally and metaphorically in the same boat as we are.

Today we see another human behavior and as much as we may have taken comfort in the previous examples of the behaviors of Jesus, this behavior before us today is a bit disturbing. It is disturbing because Jesus is rude. But I think more disturbing than that, Jesus changes his mind, and we don’t like that either. We don’t like it because, just like us, Jesus ignores this outsider, he attempts to avoid her and when he is uncharacteristically confronted by a woman who is supposed to have no recourse in this culture, his mind is changed by her. This goes against every cultural norm of this day and once again we see that our traditions and our assumed theology is NOT absolute. In this, Jesus shows us just who we are as people of faith, in that we draw conclusions that exclude and yes, in our righteousness we are rude.

Today this “outsider,” this “nobody” of a woman who carries little if no respect from the culture, shows the human exclusivity of the Kingdom of God and not even Jesus likes this. But we see that Jesus changes his mind about that exclusivity and we don’t like that, or should I say, we just have never done things this way before. For you see, in our assumptions about our faith “we” as “good” Christians adhere to our conclusions about the Word of God and our theological perspectives. Oh, we may not be outwardly rude like we see in our Gospel lesson, but we will turn

¹ Van Harn, Roger E.. The Lectionary Commentary Theological Exegesis for Sunday’s Texts, The Third Readings: Gospels. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001. These two lines are from the commentary on the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A, Gospel lesson: Matthew 15:(10-20), 21-28, page 92.

our backs and defend our exclusivity with our assumptions about our faith and limit the workings of God's mercy and grace with our subtle actions. But what do our assumptions really say about the Kingdom of God?

Jesus is showing us this very thing this morning. Today we see that the Kingdom of God heals despite the rudeness of the world...this Canaanite woman's daughter is healed instantly by a faith that is misjudged and even ignored. Jesus shows us that our efforts to express the healing purpose of God is filtered through our sensibilities, our likes and dislikes and this is not an absolute when it comes to God's mercy. God's grace and God's healing mercy is not and will not be enslaved by any human understanding or theology, it will not be enslaved by one's understandings and faith practice...nor is it bound by the human nature of God's Son Jesus Christ. What we are being taught today by Jesus is reflected in St. Paul's letter to Rome:

²⁰For 'no human being will be justified in his sight' by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin. (Romans 3:20)

One of Paul's stunning theological discoveries was that God is not only God of Jews but also God of Gentiles. But this is what the Pharisees were not happy about, their laws, their theology, and their traditions like our assumptions about our own faith and how it works make God exclusive. Because of what Paul had personally experienced of God in Jesus Christ, this became Paul's expansive view of God based upon a call by the *inclusive* Christ rather than the *exclusivity* he knew as a Pharisee named Saul. Paul asks, has God rejected His people? Isaiah reminds us in our first lesson what the Lord GOD who gathers the outcasts of Israel has proclaimed, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered. From Isaiah and from St. Paul, God is a God of all people, a God who is in some ways just like us, but none of us are God. God's salvific mercy is much broader than our assumptions about it.

We see dimly now of what is to come in the fullness of the Kingdom of God in the future. Jesus shows us that our theology, our understanding of salvation, and our attempt to express the purpose of God are very valuable vessels in which God is conveyed to each and every one of us, but it is NOT absolute. In this exchange between Jesus and this woman we see human behaviors and factors, we see persistence in the face of rudeness, we see assumed indecision when a mind suddenly changes, we see judgment of another human being who is viewed as an outsider and unworthy by social traditions and theology. Nonetheless, may our focus be on the strong persistent faith that sees all of this busted human behavior as a valuable lesson because they are the vehicle in which we see that God's mercy is not contained or enslaved by our factors or limits.

May our faith teach us to recognize what we do not fully see or understand...that it is God's mercy and God's mercy alone that frees us all from sin and death...

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