

The Reverend Kathleen Killian  
Proper 15A

*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."*

### Misericordia

In Latin, the word for mercy—*misericordia*—is the combination of two words: *miseriae* or misery and *cordis* or heart: mercy is the heart that gives itself to those in misery. In our gospel this morning a Canaanite mother and her daughter are in misery, the merciful heart of God in Jesus (eventually) given to them both.

So here we have it: two poles that encompass the entirety of existence. At one extreme, overwhelming human misery, and at the other, immeasurable divine mercy. The immense space between the two is nothing less than the playing field of life, that place where we live for a while, that place we will then leave, like Jesus. In his short life Jesus encountered and endured profound misery, and received and bestowed mercy yet more profound.

It is in that place between the poles of misery and mercy, in the playing field of life, that all humanity struggles with the same questions: what is the meaning of existence? why is there suffering? what is our purpose and God's purpose—if there is a God—and how is it that the creation is so beautiful, good, and true, yet some of its creatures so flawed, hateful, and brutal? And finally, we grapple with our final end.

In the wake of the tragic events in Charlottesville and Barcelona this week, my heart was especially heavy with these questions. I couldn't figure how to reconcile the miracle and the malevolence of life, the lucky and blessed and the terribly unlucky and seemingly not blessed.

So, one early morning I set out on a bicycle ride to feel the wind in my face, to feel something simple. I stopped at the Seawall to marvel at the pearlescent rays of light streaming down from the sky—this is God's mercy I thought—poured out upon the earth without preference or

boundary. I rode on down past Wonderland and Ship's Harbor, the piney smell of evergreen infusing my nostrils, the sounds of waking life rustling in my ear, but for all of the peace—it was early enough that most folks weren't out and about yet!—misery and mercy remained at opposite ends of the playing field of my heart.

Heck, I thought, how do we even square our “at-odds” gospel today? in which our beloved Jesus ignores a mother who has fallen to his feet begging for mercy for her sick child? The same Jesus who passionately denounces legalism, hypocrisy, and elitism doesn't even acknowledge her impassioned plea, until his disciples implore him to give this loud irritating woman, who doesn't know her place, what she wants, so she will go away and leave them all alone.

Then Jesus responds—only don't we kind of wish he hadn't?—because he all but calls the Canaanite woman a dog. Jesus' at-odds and seemingly harsh response has been interpreted in a number of ways: exhausted and harried, his day was not a good one, having recently learned of his cousin John the Baptist's beheading and wanting to retreat at the news, but instead having to miraculously feed a clamoring crowd and then walk on water in the middle of a storm to rescue his panicked disciples—talk about a long hard day at work! Then, he was in rigorous dispute with the Pharisees and the scribes over their rules about food, eating, and drinking, and having to explain it all—yet again—to his slow to understand disciples, Jesus left that place and went away, which is when he and the Canaanite woman crossed paths.

Another thought is that Jesus was testing or drawing out the woman's faith; or what Jesus said was more so a quip in jest than an insult.

All of which is speculation. But here are the facts about the two people in this story:

She: a woman, a reviled Canaanite and Gentile, unclean.

He: a man, a revered Jew and of the chosen people, clean.

Boundaries have indeed been crossed—though they have already been by Jesus himself: he has touched lepers and corpses, eaten with tax collectors and sinners, driven out unclean spirits, healed on the Sabbath, and affirmed the interiority of righteousness and obedience.

We can't know exactly why Jesus responds to the woman as he does. He seems to view her request for mercy as illegitimate because she is not Jewish, and his mission, as he understands it, is only *to the lost sheep of the house of Israel*.

*It is not fair*, Jesus says to her, *to take the children's food and throw it to the little dogs*. In a kind of verbal jujitsu, she deflects his offense and utilizing its impact, turns it back upon Jesus, while also acknowledging that she is indeed his subordinate. But she is tenacious, and like a little dog, nips at his heels: *Ah yes Lord; but even little dogs eat the scraps that fall from their masters' tables*, boldly traversing the gulf between her class and his, her culture and his, her religion and his, her gender and his, from her misery to his mercy.

In our epistle this morning, Paul himself wrestles with this conundrum of boundary. He comes to grip with the poles of misery and mercy by leveling the playing field, concluding that: *God has bound all people over to disobedience so that he might have mercy on them all*.

In other words, God has bound all people to willfulness—or free will—and we all know how miserable our choices can make us!—so that the merciful heart of God may be given to all; or in other *other* words, we're all in the same boat navigating the same seas of conscience, and playing the same game on the same field of life. Even Jesus, when he walked this earth. Even Jesus, when he was bound to the cross, that the mercy of God set us free from the misery of death.

All grace flows from God's mercy which is continuously poured out upon the errant heart of humanity—like the rays of the rising sun streaming upon the earth; if we could see directly into the radiance of the Son an intensity of suffering would be revealed, the depths of human misery redeemed in God's infinite light.

As it's said, well-behaved woman rarely make history. And so, remembering her to this day as we do, the boundary pushing Canaanite woman did. Jesus commends her “great faith” and from that moment her daughter was made whole and well; and, Jesus' mission extended from only the lost sheep of Israel to all nations and all people.

I think that in speaking of her “great faith” Jesus is not referring to a large amount, but rather to faith that has been greatly received—as it only can be— and thus largely embodied. Though perhaps but the size of a mustard seed, the faith of the Canaanite woman walks and talks and breathes and suffers. She enters into the kingdom not because she simply mouths the words “*Lord, Lord*” but because she *does* the will of the Father (Matthew 7:21)—she risks what faith she has received—she risks her heart—God's heart—out there on the playing field of life and at the border of the holy—this living out of faith in flesh the very establishment and proclamation of it.

We have come full circle in this at-odds story, from the distant poles of misery and mercy into the ever widening sphere of God's love.

From St. Faustina (Kowalska)1905-1938: Polish RC nun, canonized 2000.

*All grace flows from mercy, and the last hour abounds with mercy for us. Let no one doubt concerning the goodness of God; even if a person's sins were as dark as night, God's mercy is stronger than our misery. One thing alone is necessary; that we set ajar the door of our hearts, be it ever so little, to let in a ray of God's merciful grace, and then God will do the rest.*

Amen.

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A post sermon thought/quote:

First the fall, and then the recovery from the fall, and both are the mercy of God. —Julian of Norwich

I also used this collect after Prayers of the People, also by St. Faustina.

*Eternal God, in whom mercy is endless and the treasury of compassion inexhaustible, look kindly upon us and increase Your mercy in us, that in difficult moments we might not despair nor become despondent, but with great confidence submit ourselves to Your holy will, which is Love and Mercy itself.*