

August 16, 2020 11th Sunday after Pentecost
2a, 29-32

Isaiah 56: 1, 6-8, Romans 11:1-

Rev. Jen Nagel (with Nick Tangen), University Lutheran Church of Hope

Matthew 15:21-28

[A portion of a poem: Katherine Hawker, posted on the **Liturgy Outside**, <http://liturgyoutside.net/>]

As you listen to our gospel this morning, know that at the start of the message

you'll have the opportunity to add your voice to the chat line, typing 1 or 2 words (just 1 or 2) of what you notice or feel in this gospel.

What you notice about Jesus, or about the woman, or what you notice generally.

It's a challenging passage.

If using the chat is hard or not possible with your technology, just listen.

I'll read some of the responses out loud.

The Gospel according to Matthew, the 15th chapter.... Glory to you, O Lord.

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon.

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."

But he did not answer her at all.

And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us."

Jesus answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me."

He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish."

And her daughter was healed instantly.

The Gospel of the Lord.... Praise to you, O Christ.

Persistent, radical, dogged grace to you, beloved of Christ + Jesus. Amen.

Okay, so to start, if you haven't already, I invite you to type and add those 1 or 2 word responses:

What did you notice? What surprised you? What hit you?

[READ]

Thank you. Today's gospel is... frankly it's baffling, offensive, a cut, a slight.

Set that next to the other readings this morning:

The prophet Isaiah declares that God's house will be a house of prayer for all peoples,
the foreigners, the outcasts, all will be gathered.

And to the people of Rome, Paul writes of mercy, mercy for all, saying: "the gifts of God are irrevocable."

Those passages are so straightforward.

That's the message that rings most true to our expectations of God's promises.

But the gospel... the gospel is more challenging.

In a time when we're desperate for the good news, when we're nearly at the edge,
we must go a ways into this gospel passage to find that promise, to hear the good news.

I don't often title sermons until afterward, but the title for today is something like:

Dogged Faith in Desperate Times.

There is a lot that's feeling desperate in these days:

From storms, to wildfires in the west, strife in Lebanon and Belarus.

From economic stress, violence on our streets, to homelessness and encampments in our parks.

From mental health struggles, to the pandemic and election concerns.

From an uncertain start to school, to repairing centuries of racial wrongs.

Yesterday many Hope families gathered at Hidden Falls Park in St. Paul

for a socially distanced hike, some kick ball and frisbee, some conversation.

It was wonderful to be with others.

As much as we try to hold it together, I'll speak for myself, it's clear that at our dinner tables and in our
hearts, we're feeling the desperate times.

Maybe we know an inkling of what that desperate mom in today's gospel felt,
why she spoke and acted as she did.

After feeding the 5000, after walking on water,

Jesus and his disciples now have gone into gentile territory, the land of the "other".

It's here that this desperate mom approaches Jesus.

We never learn her name, just her ethnic and racial background.

That feels offensive in itself, diminishing, doesn't it?

But that doesn't stop her.

Nothing stops this woman: she knows what she seeks.

Her desperation is real, palpable.

Her need on behalf of her daughter is clear.

In the first few stanzas of a poem, Katherine Hawker writes:

Don't beg.

My mother told me.

Don't whine.

I tell my children.

Be polite.

The key to civil society.

The foreigner approached the rabbi.

Her need was great, her daughter ill,

Her desperation complete.

She begged.

She whined.

She was impolite.

Indeed, she broke the cultural and social norms, nearly all of them:

crossing lines of gender, and race, and civil decorum.

Who cares... Who cares about those old lines? Who cares about polite society?

Who cares when your daughter lives with demons and life is in a shambles,

when you feel oh-so-desperate,

and you know this rabbi might just have the healing she needs, you need?

Who cares if you cross the lines?

There's an uncovering, an unmasking, a naming that's happening for us these desperate days, too.

In desperation and in power, voices are rising up.

"Oh, it's not time," some say, "just bear that burden."

But why? Why keep quiet? When healing must begin, when change is needed and possible?

In this gospel story, I love this mom for her bold, feisty, unflinching ask.

I love her persistence, her dogged faith.

I love her smart and sharp tongue, the way she takes Jesus' insult and jabs back.

I love her trust in herself, and her trust in him....that there is something more, that the promises are real, and not just real for someone else's kid, but real for her and her daughter, her family.

Thank God this mom is so dogged, for she needs every bit of this to stare down Jesus.

It's hard to know what's happening in Jesus in this story.

That's where it becomes confusing for many of us:

Does he not hear her? Is he ignoring her?

We like to think of Jesus who is above the prejudice, the racial slurs, the desperation, the fray of the time.

Maybe he is, and he's just tired or worn down by so much need.

Or maybe he's testing this woman he sees as an "other".

Perhaps he's echoing the society around him.

Maybe he is laser focused on his mission to the lost sheep of Israel.

Or possibly these aren't so much the words of Jesus, but the words "put on" Jesus by the writers.

I acknowledge that these aren't necessarily adequate explanations, it's a hard passage.

Whatever the case, Jesus' ministry, his relationship, shifts.

Some love to imagine Jesus growing and evolving, stretching his thinking, his love, his mission.

In this, Jesus is a model for us. We, too, can stretch.

Others would rather Jesus didn't need to be schooled in his own biases. I hear you.

In the end the good news is there:

"Great is your faith," Jesus affirms, and this desperate mom's daughter is healed.

I've been musing this week about our dogged faith in these desperate times.

Today I've invited our Minister of Faith in Community, Nick Tangen, to reflect with us.

Nick, remember those days right after the murder of George Floyd,

how we imagined an outdoor prayer space on the patio on the east side of our building in Dinkytown?

1. **Tell us about that space.**
2. **Can you share more about the image *Jesus of the People*?**
3. **How is the space now?**

4. **Over these last days you and I were talking about the tensions of this situation. You said something about how seeing the picture Jesus of the People had shifted how you're thinking about this and the folks we see around church on the patio. Can you share more?**

Thanks, Nick, we appreciate your reflections a lot.

We've named here tensions.

It's true, there is a lot of tension with this situation.

If you're experiencing that, it's okay.

Tension is okay.

We can keep working on this as a community and keep talking about it.

These really are desperate times and this tension is an indicator that we're getting close to the hard stuff the gospel calls us to do.

Also, thanks, Nick, for your leadership we recently posted expectations for those who use the patio.

We're trying to be more transparent with our unsheltered neighbors on the patio, our neighbors who have houses, and members of this faith community...

more transparent about how we use that space: what's acceptable, and what's not.

Dear friends, these are desperate times.

It's hard, very hard, for everyone, in our own ways.

It's tempting to "other" people, to separate ourselves and then fail to notice other's pain, other's humanity.

May God bless you with dogged faith in these desperate days.

May Jesus of the People be your way, your Savior, your hope.

May the Holy Spirit sustain you with healing and grace for today and for tomorrow. Amen.