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Pentecost 14

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“Merciful Struggles”

Text: Matthew 15:21-28 (Isaiah 56:1, 6-8)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

What do you do when things in your life are falling apart? When your back is against the wall and there seems to be nowhere to go? When nothing seems to be going right, and now even your daughter is severely oppressed by a demon? What do you do?

You pray. You turn to the help of the helpless, the hope of the hopeless, and the friend of the friendless. You fall down on your knees before Jesus – who has come all the way out to your region and to your little town – and cry out: Lord, have mercy!

But then what do you do when your help, your hope, and your friend doesn't seem to be your help, hope, and friend at all? When it seems as if He does not hear, does not care, and does not want to help? When it feels like you're talking to a brick wall, and the voices of His friends are drowning out your cries for mercy, telling Him to send you away?

What do you do? What have you done?

Yes, what have you done? For I don't know any Christian who hasn't been in this place. Crying out to our Saviour because I can't handle what's going on in my life – it is too much, too heavy, and too long. Yet instead of help, it seems as if God does not hear, does not care, and does not want to help. My prayers seem to vanish as soon as they leave my mouth, and it seems as if I am all alone, with God a thousand miles away. Or more.

Been there? What do you do then?

It is quite a different situation than what we heard last week, isn't it? Last week, Peter, sinking in the Sea of Galilee cried out to Jesus: Lord, save me! and Jesus

answered him immediately, stretching out His hand and pulling Peter out of a watery grave. But today, how differently Jesus responds. When this Canaanite woman cries out to Him, first Jesus seems to ignore her, then He seems to exclude her, then He seems to insult her! And many have wondered why? Was it because she was a Canaanite? Or because she was a woman? Or because she wasn't one of the twelve? Or because of her sin?

That is what we often do too, when we are in that situation, isn't it? When it seems as if our Saviour does not hear, does not care, and does not want to help. We ask why? What's wrong with me? What have I done? Why am I being punished? We question our Lord's ways, we doubt His love, we fail to believe. We fail to believe because my thoughts and feelings wind up trumping the promises of my Saviour and His Word, and so I am left to wonder whether my merciful and gracious Lord is very merciful and gracious at all.

That is what made the faith of this Canaanite woman so great. It wasn't just her persistence – it was that nothing could move her from believing that Jesus was merciful and gracious. Whatever her mind was telling her, whatever her heart was telling her, whatever the disciples were telling her – greater than all these things were the words and promises of God. Words and promises like what we heard through the prophet Isaiah: that the Lord has come for all people; that He would bring even foreigners to His holy mountain; that His house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations. These were promises for her! So that when the house of the Lord – not a house of stone, but a house of flesh and bone! – came to her town that day, He had come for her! And so He was her house of prayer. The Lord had come to her to be what He is: merciful and gracious.

And so it is for us. Our Lord comes for us to be what He is: merciful and gracious. That doesn't mean that He will be merciful and gracious to all people the same. He knew what Peter needed, what the Canaanite woman needed, and what we need. In fact, He knows this better than we do. And so His work in my life will be different than yours. Different ways, different times. Not one better than another, just different. . . . But yet again, what happens is that our sinful nature takes hold of those differences and accuses God of not being fair, or not really knowing what I need, or not understanding my life. And our unbelief rears its ugly head once again. Questioning, doubting, wanting to tell God what to do and how to do it. As if we knew better than Him.

But better than listening to us (when we try to instruct God!), our Lord does what He is, and plants His cross in the middle of our lives. For there Jesus showed us a

mercy and love far exceeding anything we could ever ask for or imagine. The mercy and love of a God who would come to serve the servants, to take upon Himself the sins of the rebellious, to shed His blood in place of ours. The “eye for an eye, and tooth for a tooth” (Lev 24:20) that we deserve – He gave His eyes, teeth, and everything else in place of ours. And this He did to defeat the demon that has severely oppressed us, beginning with Adam and Eve and continuing on to today. That demon named satan, who oppresses us with guilt and death and wishes nothing for us but a miserable and despairing life.

But into this life of sin and death, the Lord of life came, to end the tyranny of satan through His own death and resurrection. And He comes now to hear the cries and prayers of His children, and to have mercy upon us. That instead of trying to figure Him out and climb into His hiddenness and wisdom, we cling to Him (like the Canaanite woman) where He comes to us today – into our Tyre and Sidons, our Viennas and Washingtons – where He has come to be merciful and gracious.

And so we cling to Him in the water of Holy Baptism, knowing that this is no plain water, but water combined with His Word and promise, where the Lord of life is expelling the demon that oppresses us and giving us faith and life. That when it seems as if He doesn't hear, doesn't care, and doesn't help, I know I am baptized! I am a child of God who my Father will not forsake.

And then we cling to Him in the bread and wine of Holy Communion, knowing that this is no plain food – no mere crumbs that are falling from our Master's table! – but the Lord of life feeding us who hunger and thirst for righteousness with His own body and blood, and giving us forgiveness and salvation. That when it seems as if He doesn't hear, doesn't care, and doesn't help, instead of opening my mouth in complaining and doubt, I open it to receive Him who gave everything for me.

And also we cling to Him in His Word of forgiveness, knowing that these are no plain words, but the Lord of life giving us exactly what we need – forgiveness. The forgiveness that heals our unbelief. The forgiveness that restores our sonship. The forgiveness that teaches us that Jesus does hear, does care, and does want to have mercy upon on. That He desires to exclude no one from His mercy and grace, but draw all near to Him – to expel the demons that torment and oppress us, setting us free, and giving us His life. The life we had in the beginning. The life that will never end.

That is the life and faith your Saviour desires for you. A faith which is not easy, but

which is strong to endures the trials and troubles of this life. To give you such a faith, Jesus will be merciful in ways that may seem unmerciful, and gracious in ways that may seem anything but! But the hands that are at work in your life have been imprinted with the holes of love – and you can be sure will work in you according to that love. Not just some of the time, but all of the time. Not according to your wisdom, but according to His.

So the next time you find yourself in the place of the Canaanite woman, do not defend yourself – for mercy is undeserved. Do not stand up for yourself – for God opposes the proud and gives grace to the humble. (James 4:6) Do not listen to the lying voice of the one who wants you to doubt. Instead, pray your Lord, have mercy, and know that He will. And if it means struggle and difficulty for a time, then thanks be to God! Who loves you enough to give you what you need, to not give you what you don't, and who is wise enough to know the difference.

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

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.