

Jesus said to the Canaanite woman: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." (Mt. 15:26) Dogs! Whoa! Did Jesus just call the Canaanite woman's child *a dog*? Why would Jesus have such disregard for the Canaanite people by calling them dogs? Is this a misprint in the biblical witness or did Jesus really say this? Today's story raises difficult questions about Jesus' response to a marginalized woman. Why is he so harsh to this woman who is begging him to heal her daughter? Where is his compassion and mercy for the outsider, the sick, and the needy? And what can we learn about maturing in our own faith by following in his footsteps? Today I would like to talk about cultivating mercy in our own lives. And I will use today's gospel story as my text. Let's take a closer look.

Right before this encounter with the woman, Jesus has had a run in with the Jewish leaders who accuse him of being loosey-goosey with purity codes, like not washing one's hands before eating. He defends his actions and accuses these religious leaders of blindness and hypocrisy. He then decides to leave town and heads north into "Canaanite" territory, to the towns of Tyre and Sidon. These towns are located on southern coast of what is now known as Lebanon, just north of modern-day Israel. As you may recall, the Israelites had a toxic relationship with the Canaanites since the time of the Exodus from Egypt. Once the Israelites had crossed the Jordan River some 1200 years earlier, they killed many of its people and subsequently tried to eradicate much of the Canaanite religion and culture. Needless to say, there was no great love between the Canaanites and the Jews.

At this point in the story, a Canaanite woman from that region approaches Jesus, a rather bold act for those times. Differences in ethnicity, heritage, religion, gender, and demon possession, forbid her from entering into Jewish circles. However, this does not stop her from pursuing medical treatment for her child. She begins to shout at Jesus: "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." Instead of being moved with mercy and sharing his gifts of healing with her tormented child, he ignores the mother, hoping that she will go away. But like any mother who cares deeply for her sick child, she persists and begs him to help. Jesus replies: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Undeterred, she replies: "Yes. Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Jesus listens to her rebuttal, grows in mercy, changes his mind, and then ends up healing her daughter. This complex interaction reveals just how human Jesus is.

What I find most remarkable about this story is Jesus' willingness to grow in understanding and compassion by taking the time to listen to a marginalized woman, to move beyond the cultural barriers of his society, and to broaden his ministry of healing and hospitality beyond the house of Israel. In summary, Jesus was big enough not to be ashamed to learn something from a gentile, Canaanite woman. He was humble enough to grow in his vocation by expanding his ministry of healing to include the foreigner. As Maya Angelou once said: "Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better."

Mercy! Mercy is something that is in short supply today. Mercy is showing compassion or forgiveness towards someone whom it is within one's power to punish or ignore. Mercy is an act of kindness that springs forth from a generous heart. It is the capacity to respond affectively to the plight of another person's suffering. Mercy comes from the French word, *merci*, which means *thank you*.

Embracing a posture of mercy is not something that comes naturally to most of us because we are not biologically programmed for it. Instead, we are hardwired for fight or flight, to give tit for tat, to look out for #1 first and foremost. We get weary of those who screw up and do not do their part. Sometimes we get burnt out, while other times, we struggle with compassion fatigue and simply turn inward. We all have impediments that keep us from being more merciful. Maybe Jesus' response to the Canaanite woman was because he was so overwhelmed with the crowds of people clamoring for his attention.

We have a tendency to hold onto old hurts, justifying our anger by refusing to forgive and let go. We are afraid of those whom we consider our enemies and justify acts of violence against them. We often prefer being right over being loving. Many of us have the inability to tolerate another person's worldview that is different from our own. In these cases, we are likely to shut down emotionally and distance ourselves, thereby withholding understanding and mercy. This is what was happening during Jesus' time between the Jews and the Gentiles. This is what is happening in parts of Africa and the Middle East between the Muslims and the Christians. This is what is happening in Europe between the Russians and the Ukrainians. And this is what is happening in our own country between the democrats and republicans.

Jesus said: "Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy." [Mt. 5:7] I remember the time I was shown mercy by a complete stranger. I was going to school full-time and my resources were scarce. I was running low on groceries and so I asked my roommate to borrow her car to stock up on goods. While backing out her car from the grocery store, I heard a thump and realized that I had hit the rear quarter panel of the car next to me. It was then that I remembered that my roommate had not paid her car insurance. My heart began to beat loudly and I became fearful that I would have to pay a hefty bill. What was I to do? I wrote my phone number on a piece of paper with the words, "I hit your car" and placed it on the windshield. I then returned home and waited.

Like most of you, I had been brought up in culture which counted, measured, judged, and punished those who offended. So when the call came, I held my breath and waited for my sentence. Would he yell at me for the damage done? Would he demand immediate payment? Would he negotiate a monthly payment plan? To my surprise, the owner was not aware of the dent in his car. When I explained the situation, he told me to "hold on" and went into his garage to take a look. When he returned, he simply said: "Don't worry about it. It's not that bad." Mercy!

Ten years later while sitting in my car in a school parking lot, I heard a thump as my car shook. I looked in my rear-view mirror and noticed a car had hit my rear bumper. As I got out of the car to review the damage, I saw a harried father who had just dropped his child off at school. He was shaking his head and looking forlorn. I looked at the bumper and then at the father and said: "Don't worry about it. It's not that bad." Mercy begets

mercy. Mercy, kicks into the universe a new trajectory that brings light into the darkness. “A little bit of mercy makes the world less cold and more just.” *(Pope Francis)*

So how do we grow in mercy? Cultivating the habit of mercy is a matter of practice and desire. It is a life-long process that begins with the acknowledgement of the grace we have received from God and continues with an appreciation for the mercy that has been shown to us by others. Mercy begets mercy thereby strengthening our habit of mercy. There is nothing more healing than to be forgiven for our trespasses. There is nothing more joyful than to experience the flourishing of another person whose suffering is relieved and whose life is enhanced through acts of mercy and compassion. And so we continue to pray: “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

*(The Lord's Prayer)*

Mercy can wipe away a debt that is owed, giving the offender a 2nd chance to thrive. Mercy includes clemency, benevolence, pity, forbearance, compassion, forgiveness, and the giving of alms and service. It involves missions of mercy to the hungry, the poor, the prisoner, the suffering, and those who do not have medical care. Mercy necessitates social justice and causes us to challenge those structures in society that corrupt and destroy the creatures of God. Mercy (as a habit of the heart) must expand to include the neighbor whom we cannot see, whose lands are despoiled by our waste and extractions of their natural resources for our economic benefit. The vast majority of the world's population is experiencing great suffering because of our systemic exploitation of the human and material resources of our world due to irresponsible capitalism. And while there is often little we can do on a global scale to affect the current chaos and pain in our world, we still have the power to vote, to speak up, to reduce our carbon footprint, and to stretch out our arms of mercy and bestow compassion on those within our reach.

Today, the world is just too dangerous and too beautiful for anything but love and mercy. Mercy gives hope to those who receive it and frees us from past mistakes. And so in that spirit of mercy and freedom, I would like to end with the words of a song called, *We shall be Free*: “When the last child cries for a crust of bread, when the last man dies for just words that he said, when there's shelter over the poorest head...we shall be free. When the last thing we notice is the color of the skin, and the first thing we look for is the beauty within; when the skies and the oceans are clean again...we shall be free. We shall be free, we shall be free. Stand straight, walk proud, cause we shall be free. When we're free to love anyone we choose, when this world's big enough for all different views, when we all can worship from our own kind of pew...then we shall be free.”

*(Song is played during the time of meditation following sermon.)*