

**Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost (b)**  
**Isaiah 35:4-7a James 2:1-17 Mark 7:24-37**  
**St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH**  
**September 5, 2021 (Traditional)**

Jesus seems so harsh toward the woman in today's gospel. To understand what's going on, let's imagine we are the parents of four children. One of them, little Diane, is about to have a birthday. We take her aside, about a month before her birthday, and we tell her that when the big day comes, she's going to get the gift of her dreams: a pony.

Now imagine if, on Diane's birthday, we drive all four kids out to the stables, and standing there in front of us are *four* ponies. A pony for each child. Of course it would be wonderful for the three kids who weren't expecting it. But for Diane, there's a strange, mixed message coming across there. If you're Diane, you're saying to yourself, "My parents made a special promise to me—but the promise was, in the end, kind of meaningless, because it wasn't really for *me* after all."

For hundreds of years, God had been promising the Jewish people through the prophets that he was going to send a savior to them. The Messiah was going to deliver the Jewish people from their enemies. He would set them free from their subservience to the more powerful nations like Rome so that they could fulfill the destiny that God had prepared for them. To show the light of God to the whole world. To be a missionary nation. God had announced this plan all the way back in Genesis 12: the whole world would come to know God and be blessed through the people of Israel. God made unique promises to Israel.

This explains why in the gospels, Jesus restricted his mission to his own people, the Jews. We often don't notice that because non-Jewish people like the woman in today's gospel come into the story repeatedly. But not because Jesus was purposely seeking them out. Like a good parent, God was being consistent—he was following through first on his promises to Israel. This is why Jesus says to the Syrophenician woman in today's gospel that it would be unfair if he helped her. He's basically saying, "I made a promise to Diane. It wouldn't be right for me to give ponies out to everybody on Diane's birthday."

So I hope that helps us understand his initial reluctance to help the woman. Jesus is staying true to his first priority. Once we understand that—the real surprise of the story becomes clear. The real surprise is that he ends up giving this gentile woman—this non-Jew—the gift anyway! He drives the demon out of her daughter. So in one passage, we see that Jesus is staying true to God's promise, that he will give Israel their pony first, just like he said he would. But we also see, that being true to Israel will not keep God from throwing an amazing birthday party for all of his children in the end, in Jesus Christ. All God's promises to Israel and his plan for the whole world—it's all going to be fulfilled in Jesus.

Throughout this month, here at St. John's, we're moving towards a special *recommitment Sunday*... the last Sunday of September. It's been 19 months of discombobulation, challenges posed by the pandemic, frustration over not being able to do church the way we normally do it, political conflict that's tearing families apart. It's easy to see the evil in all this. But as Paul tells

us, “We know that all things work together for **good** for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” Do we believe that? Personally I know that God has taken a lot of things out of my hands this last year. I don’t like it. God has done a good job of stripping a lot of my certainties away this past year. Praise God. He’s stripped me down to the basics... to the free grace of Jesus Christ. So that I can know his saving power in my life more fully. Similarly, as God’s Church, when our sense of security is stripped away and the world is a fearful place like it is now, we can either contract into a defensive stance... we can worry about everything, grasping for what we’ve lost. Or we can face the truth squarely: God is calling us to faith in him, he’s calling us to repent of our apathy, our sense of spiritual entitlement, the worldly securities and certainties we hold onto. He’s calling us back to faith in him, and to a renewed sense of commitment and mission as local congregations. And yes, to a new sense of excitement and joy in our faith.

The woman in today’s gospel: her kind of faith—bare-bones faith—is where we can start. When life gets messy like it is right now with all that’s going on, we often sense that we’re losing our comfortable old position on the inside with everyone else around us, and being pushed to the outside. Like we’ve become outsiders. A lot of Christians are feeling more and more like outsiders these days, and we never imagined we’d be here. But isn’t that exactly where the woman in the gospel is? She is THE outsider. The non-Jew. But then we remember who flocked to Jesus. It tended to be the outsiders: the prostitutes, tax collectors, the social rejects, a motley crew of disciples, who tended to embrace him. The majority of his own people—the comfortable insiders—rejected him. It was people like the gentile woman in today’s gospel, who knew they didn’t have a leg to stand on in front of God, who knew they didn’t have a right to ask anything from him...these were the ones who became his followers. But the majority of his own people were put off by Jesus because he didn’t fit their expectations. Literally, God was not doing what the insiders thought he should be doing. Isn’t there a lesson for us there? As in, I’m very sure what *should be* happening in the world today...but clearly God has different ideas. Maybe God is doing something in today’s world that, if I jump on board with it, is going to involve me giving up a lot of those securities I took for granted.

Anyway, the woman in the gospel knows she has no right to ask anything from this Jewish preacher. So she puts herself completely at his mercy. She begs Jesus to cast the demon out of her daughter. And when Jesus calls her a gentile dog, she not only easily accepts the insult, but without flinching, she turns it into a witty comeback, as in “Yes sir, I am a dog—but even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” She has no defenses left: Just desperate love for her daughter and desperate hope in Jesus. She stands there in front of him with nothing in her hands. And if there’s ever a moment Jesus is thrown off balance in the gospels, it has to be right there. And I bet he loved it. We don’t know if he laughed, but it’s clear this woman completely wins him over. He says “for saying that, you can go—the demon has left your daughter.” Isn’t it interesting how the first thing he says is “you can go.” He releases her. It’s done. The battle’s won. He sets her free for a joyful reunion with her daughter. And it’s all in response to her letting Jesus be Jesus. Her faith holds onto nothing but him.

I think of the ministry fair we’re having here at St. Johns today; I look at this list of all the ministries we traditionally have had, going strong here at St. John’s. I look at the commitment cards here for the end of this month. I hope and pray for a response and I know the amazing

response this congregation is capable of making—I've seen it. But let's be honest: with what's happened the past 18 months there's more pressure, there's more anxiety around everything than usual. Sometimes I can hear that grasping part of me whispering—aren't you worried? What's going to happen? What if things don't come back the way you want them to come back? And this is when, in our worry and anxiety, we start losing sight of who we are and who God is. This is when we are tempted to claim too much control for ourselves, so we start to feel overburdened. We start spreading blame everywhere. We start making claims on other people, on life, and on God that we have no business making. We come out of that same place of fear that the old insiders were coming from in the gospels. His own people couldn't even see who Jesus was because they were so bound up in their own fear and need to control everything; they saw everything as a threat. They even saw their own Savior as a threat.

But the woman in the gospel: she reminds us that right here, right now, we have no claim on God; we are not in control of the future here. We have no right to even be here, calling upon God in the first place. I know it sounds strange, but here's the truth; the first thing to do as we're looking at this list of all these ways we can serve God is to step back and let it all go, to give it all to God in worship and praise, to put it all in his hands, to *let God be God*. Thank him for everything. Praise him for setting us free already, for giving us the crumbs from his table [*wafer*]. Let's be happy with these crumbs. With this, he releases us from all our bondage to the world's craziness, to sin, to death, to fear and anxiety.

Praise God for giving us his outsider perspective. And that we can be outsiders together in fellowship. All the things on this list—none of this is the key to our future. These are just simple and beautiful ways we can show love for our Savior, who himself is the Key. It's all a gift. When everything we do starts with the feast of victory that God gives us in Christ, that's when people start noticing the light that's shining in the darkness. That's when insiders turn into missionaries who go out into the world with that light.