**Nu‘uanu Congregational Church, 2651 Pali Highway**

**United Church of Christ Honolulu, Hawai‘i 96817**

**Online Worship & Sermon August 16, 2020**

**ELEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**

PRELUDE Katherine Crosier

*I Call to You, Lord Jesus Christ* | J. S. Bach

ANNOUNCEMENTS Lori Yamashiro

OPENING SENTENCES Rev. Jeannie Thompson

In the midst of all the commotion and disorder of our lives, it is a good and blessed thing to set aside this day, and this hour, for the pursuit of calm and grace. This is who God is. This is what God offers us. This is the God who has promised that we will never be left in despair. This is the God who will always find the lost, the needful, the ignored and shunned. This is the God who lifts the broken onto strong shoulders and bears us to a place of safety and wholeness. So, let us open our minds to hear God’s words of hope and compassion.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Lord of grace, throughout your earthly life you refused to ignore those whom it is all too easy for us to ignore: the destitute, the homeless, the sick, the ignorant. Even when it would have prolonged your life to ignore them, you continued to heal and to teach those who came to you for help. When we compare our behavior with your example, we are ashamed. We confess that we have been self-centered and proud. We confess our absurd, craven fear of being seen as do-gooders or radicals. Although we may not have intentionally inflicted harm, our silence, our ignorance and our passive neglect have been harmful just the same.  
Soften our stony hearts until we can no longer tolerate any suffering that is within our power to ease. Correct our careless attitude toward others. Increase our respect for the dignity of all human life, for the sake of Jesus, who served and suffered for us all. Amen.

***(Please offer God your prayers of confession as we keep a brief silence.)***

ASSURANCE OF PARDON

People of God, hear the good news and believe: Christ has gone ahead of us; has lifted our burden of sin onto his own shoulders, and has opened the door to new life. Let us pass through into a life filled with grace—for ourselves and each other.

PASSING THE PEACE OF GOD

*In the safest way possible, please pass the peace of Christ to those who are with you.*

A READING FROM THE GOSPELS Becky Kanenaka

Matthew 15:21-28 *A Canaanite Woman’s Faith*

21Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. 22Just 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.’ 23But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, ‘Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.’ 24He answered, ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.’ 25But she came and knelt before him, saying, ‘Lord, help me.’ 26He answered, ‘It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.’ 27She said, ‘Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.’ 28Then Jesus answered her, ‘Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.’ And her daughter was healed instantly.

SERMON *“Kyrie Eleison”* Pastor

The story we just heard is, I hope, a surprise and a disappointment.

It is disappointing to read and hear an attempt to turn away a woman who is asking for help. It is even more disappointing to read and hear that the help she has been denied is for her daughter. More disappointment when we read and hear her being compared to “a dog.” Finally, it is disappointing to read and hear all of this rejection coming from the lips of the disciples…and *Jesus.*

Although the disciples often respond badly and have to be corrected, this is *not* the way we expect Jesus to react. We expect *Jesus* to admonish the disciples for their prejudice—and that is what it was, too. It was racial and religious prejudice.

The woman, as the Gospel writer is careful to point out, is a Canaanite—this is the only way she is known throughout this passage. She is “the Canaanite woman.” The phrase is repeated several times—it is an important detail we are supposed to notice.

This means that the woman is a Gentile, which is to say she is a pagan, even an idolator. As such she would have been an outrage and a disgrace to respectable Jews like Jesus and the disciples.

The Canaanite woman, *and* her daughter worshiped in a way that was detested by the Jewish people. This was bad enough. What was even worse is that, as a Gentile, she did not follow any of the laws—especially the dietary laws of the Jews. So, in addition to being an idolator, she was also ritually unclean by virtue of what she ate.

Finally, if all of this was not enough, she was a woman!

Unfamiliar women, women who were not members of your family, did *not* accost men who were strangers to them. They did not accost strange men in the street, they especially did not follow them around shouting at them—not even for mercy, not even for your daughter.

So, I hope this whole story is a surprise and a disappointment for us all.

The question becomes: *in whom are we disappointed?*

Well, how about the woman?

Jesus’ reaction is about what was typical at that time and that place. Jews and Gentiles did not have a lot in common. Indeed, as I mentioned a little while ago: Gentiles were not considered respectable. They violated just about all of the values that Jews believed were important, even sacred.

The thing is: she was not just a Canaanite woman. She was not just a Gentile. She was a mother who was seeking relief for a sick child.

For most of us, this gives the Canaanite woman a universal passport to cross any boundary she needs to (short of mayhem and violence). For most of us, a sick child in need will always vindicate a parent if, in their concern and sense of urgency, they forego the social niceties we usually practice.

So, I repeat: in whom are we disappointed? Who is left?

The disciples are always a good target for disappointment. Jesus is often admonishing them for some error in judgement. However, in this particular story, the disciples do not behave too much differently than Jesus.

So, shall we be disappointed in *Jesus?*

It is at this point, we need to look again at what Matthew has recorded—not just the passage we heard this morning, but also the verses leading up to this story, and the chapter that follows. It is not the Canaanite woman, not the disciples, and certainly *not* Jesus we should hold responsible for the disappointing feelings this story evokes. We need to look a little closer to home to find that person. (Here is a hint: we should look in the mirror.)

In the verses leading up to this one, Jesus has spoken very pointedly about just what we may consider tainted or unclean. Indeed, his language is very explicit when he talks about how what goes into the mouth is of little value as it will eventually be flushed away into the sewer. (It would be difficult to be any plainer than that!)

“But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles,” says Jesus in verse 18.

In other words: you cannot and should not pass judgement on a person’s character and worth based on what they eat, or on other superficial criteria. It is, says Jesus, what comes *out* of a person’s mouth that tells you who they are and what they value, and whether or not they are “respectable.” It is the way in which we treat others that tells us who we really are and who God is in our lives.

This was a new idea, and probably a very shocking one for the disciples. These are men who were good and observant Jews, men who had followed all of the laws of their religion all of their lives.

These laws are an important part of what distinguished the Jews from other the other ethnic and religious groups that surrounded them. The laws were also part of their religious practice—they were, and are, a sacrifice they made to God. Let me repeat that: the observance of the law was a daily sacrifice, a way of living that showed their constant devotion to God.

To keep the laws—not just dietary but all of them—is to honor the tradition and the identity given to them by God, and brought down and made known to them by Moses. To put aside such long respected tradition would have been very difficult—it meant putting aside a part of their identity as a people, and as a people faithful to God.

So, the story we heard—about Jesus and the Canaanite woman—comes on the heels of this brand new idea Jesus has just described to the disciples. And in this story, we see just what it means to encounter a person you have been taught to shun.

Jesus shows us what this looks like. He puts into practice the very new ideal he has just explained to the disciples, and he does this by putting a human face on a category of people who have been labeled: “unclean,” or “unworthy.”

She is not a label, the Canaanite woman is a mother. Indeed, she shares all of the heart and determination to secure healing for her daughter that any person in Jesus’ and the disciples’ own circle would.

Moreover, in the exchange between herself and Jesus, the Canaanite woman is humble, she is not ashamed to accept being compared to a dog. Instead of being indignant she points out to Jesus how—even if it is the smallest of crumbs—even a dog may claim a blessing. Yes, even a dog may claim God’s mercy, God’s blessing.

You and I may still cringe at the comparison. However, in this story, and from then on, no one is left out of God’s mercy. From that moment on, Jesus and the Canaanite woman break wide-open the way in which people—all people—will be encountered in God’s good world. God’s love and blessing are available to all.

One of the things that is happening as Matthew writes his version of the good news is that the community of people who have embraced Jesus as the Messiah, as the Christ—this community is now beginning to welcome people from beyond the Jewish community.

Thus, Matthew remembers and recounts a story that helps the emerging churches to be prepared as they encounter more and more new members who will come to them ignorant of the older traditions. Matthew is helping them remember and re-establish just what is going to be important for the community who have chosen to follow Jesus.

Matthew is setting up—for the people of his own time, and for us—a challenge—which he will make explicit in the next chapter. It is in chapter sixteen that Jesus asks Peter and the disciples: “…who do you say I am?” [v. 15]

I believe that Matthew’s objective was to help us come to know who Jesus is by what he has taught them, and how he has shown them how God’s mercy can go forth, and is not limited by superficial obstacles.

I hope they, and we, will come to know who Christ is by how faithfully God will always respond to the soul in anguish who cries out, *Kyrie Eleison—God have mercy.*

And I hope that knowing this God of infinite mercy, we, too, will be inspired to have mercy for each other, and even for ourselves.

I hope our mercy will encourage us to listen more than we speak. I hope God’s mercy will inspire us to greater patience with each other, and a willingness to turn and allow ourselves to discover and cherish the humanity—even in the people we find most difficult—this is the way understanding begins. This is the way reconciliation happens.

Most of all, I pray that God’s steadfast mercy, and Christ’s example will give us the hope we need to go forth—even into the world we know today, and all of its challenges.

Finally, I hope we will not be disappointed in the disciples, or Jesus, or even ourselves, but will, instead, commit ourselves to learning more and more of who Jesus is so that we may also know, with our whole heart and soul, this Christ and his infinite love and mercy.

Let it be so. Amen.

LITANY AS CONGREGATIONAL RESPONSE

Pastor: Mighty God, we pray for all those whose lives are governed by fear — of failure, pain, illness, loss, and the fears we silently lay before you now.

**Response: God of mercy, hear our prayer.**

Pastor: Holy God, we pray for all those who seek reconciliation — with a family member, a friend, a coworker, and any we silently name before you now.

**Response: God of hope, hear our prayer.**

Pastor: Loving God, we pray for those ill in body, mind, or spirit, especially those we silently name before you now.

**Response: God of compassion, hear our prayer.**

Pastor: Merciful God, we pray for all those living in anger — in naming those things that make us angry before you now, aloud, or silently, may the anger be released.

**Response: God of grace, hear our prayer.**

Pastor: Holy God, we lift all the concerns of our hearts and minds and ask you to renew, strengthen and restore us.

**Response: We pray in the name of your Son, our Lord. Amen.**

MUSIC FOR MEDITATION *Vesper’s Song |* Eddie Ryan

*This lovely piece was written in memory of Vesper Ito, who passed away on August 16, 1987.*

*It was given as a gift to her parents, Steve and Ann Ito. Used with permission.*

PASTORAL PRAYER & THE LORD’S PRAYER

*We thank you for your faithfulness to the ministries and mission of our church.*

*Please send your offering directly to the church.*

DOXOLOGY

**BENEDICTION**

Let us rejoice at being servants of God — summoned by the Spirit,

called into community, led by faith, inspired for service,

and in all things, consumed by joy.

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

**POSTLUDE** *Come, Holy Spirit* | J. S. Bach Katherine Crosier