

**The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost**  
**August 16, 2020**  
**Matthew 15:21-28**

*“Lord, Help Me”*

My four daughters are now young adults, and so they are now “adulting,” which is the word that young people use to describe what you do as an adult: go to work, pay bills, grocery shopping, do laundry, clean the house, etc. The noun “adult” has become a verb: “adulting.” For my wife and me, this means that parenting is different now than it was when our girls were little, of course, but you never stop being a parent. In those early years when our daughters were young, this meant a lot more hands-on help with things like putting on clothes so jeans and tops weren’t inside-out or learning to put shoes on the right feet. But help isn’t always welcome, even from little ones. I remember trying to help my girls get dressed, put their shoes on, and those other everyday tasks only to be met with a very determined look and a little voice that said, “I do it myself!” And, of course, that’s how we learn by doing it ourselves. We find out that doing things by ourselves is not as easy as it looks when somebody else has been doing it for you. I also recall that sometimes after struggling to get the shirt on right side out or all the buttons lined up, and the whole process was not going according to plan for that little person, there could be this very deep sigh followed by a very frustrated look and these words: “Can you help me?” It is that simple request for help that is before us today in the Gospel lesson as the Canaanite woman comes to Jesus in behalf of her daughter. That woman’s request of Jesus serves as the basis for today’s sermon, “Lord, Help Me.” May the Lord’s rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus’ sake.

Today’s Old Testament lesson (Isaiah 56:1, 6-8) is witness that God’s concern was not just for his chosen people, but for the outsider and foreigner as well. In fact, it is a verse from today’s Old Testament lesson that Jesus quotes after he entered into Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday. What immediately follows his triumphal entry into Jerusalem is his cleansing of the temple. As Jesus overturned the tables of the moneychangers he reminded the people of this Word of God: **“My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you make it a den of robbers”** (Matthew 21:13, quoting Isaiah 56:7b). The mission of God’s chosen people of old was to be a light to the nations so that all the nations around them would be so drawn to the God of Israel through the people of Israel that salvation would spread to all people. Sadly, that did not happen. What did happen was that God’s people became more and more inward-focused. They became increasingly suspicious of anyone who was not of Israel, and came to look down on the outsider and foreigner as not only unclean but even unworthy of salvation. Is there wisdom here for us today? Absolutely. We who are called by Christ and bear his Name are to be a light to the nations today. The temptation for God’s people, now as then, is that we become increasingly self-absorbed and inward-focused, suspicious of outsiders and unwilling to consider new ways that will give to others the grace that we ourselves have received. And so we miss the point of what God is trying to do. Instead of furthering God’s mission, we run the risk of becoming an obstacle, a roadblock, to it. Perhaps a cleansing of God’s house may be needed once again.

The woman in today’s Gospel lesson is an outsider and a foreigner to Israel. She is called a Canaanite, which means that she was a descendent of the original people who were in the land of Canaan before the Hebrews entered in to possess it. Jesus is now way up north on the Mediterranean coast in those ancient Phoenician cities of Tyre and Sidon, in what is today Lebanon. Jesus is outside good Jewish territory and among the Gentiles. He is at risk of becoming ritually unclean. We do not even know the woman’s name, but we know that she has a great need. It’s not for herself, but for her daughter, who is demon-possessed. Like any good parent, she will do whatever she has to do for the sake of her child. And when a parent cannot find the help they need for their child, they become desperate. We hear and read about this kind of thing all the time in the news. And so that desperate mom comes to Jesus: **“Have mercy on me, O Lord,**

**Son of David; my daughter is severely possessed by a demon**” (Matthew 15:22b). Curiously, Jesus doesn’t respond to her. He ignored her, and that strikes us as rather rude. Why didn’t Jesus answer her? But the woman is not so easily put off. She persists and perseveres, even when Jesus bluntly tells her: **“I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”** (Matthew 21:24). It is then that she comes before Jesus with this simple, 3-word prayer: **“Lord, help me”** (Matthew 21:25). And here is a model prayer for us as well. Nothing fancy; just coming to Jesus with our need, whatever need that might be: “Lord, help me.” We come to Jesus because we have learned the hard way that “I do it myself” does not work. We need help that comes from outside ourselves. We need help that comes from Jesus.

But why didn’t Jesus help the woman immediately? The answer lies in Jesus’ unique mission that comes through in Matthew’s Gospel. In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus instructs the twelve apostles with these words: **“Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”** (Matthew 10:5-6). The mission of Jesus began with God’s chosen people of old, and from there, would extend to all people. This is why, after Jesus had finished his redeeming work through his life, death, and resurrection, Matthew’s Gospel concludes with the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20), that calls the apostles to **“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations…”** But this is where the confines of the mission meet human need: Lord, help me. Even when Jesus tells her, **“It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs”** (Matthew 21:26), Jesus reaffirms that his primary mission is to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. This sounds insulting and demeaning to our ears, but this woman, who trusted that Jesus could help her little girl when no one else could, pushed through this and said with all boldness: **“Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table”** (Matthew 21:27). And Jesus praises this Gentile outsider, this Canaanite foreigner, for her confident faith: **“O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire”** (Matthew 15:28). And her little girl was healed instantly.

Sometimes in life that’s all we can say, “Lord, help me.” And that is enough. Like that Canaanite woman, we can only come to the Lord Jesus seeking his help, knowing that because of our sin, we, too, are outsiders and foreigners to the righteousness of God. But we do come, trusting not in our own righteousness, but in Jesus’ righteousness. Like that Canaanite woman, we come trusting that Jesus is able to help when no one and nothing else can. Because Jesus gave his life for us on the cross, because he has shed his blood for the forgiveness of all our sins, because he has restored us to a right relationship with our heavenly Father, then truly Jesus is more than willing to help us in our need. There is no need so great, no burden so heavy, no problem so difficult that there is not mercy and grace to help in time of need from the Lord Jesus Christ. May the Lord Jesus, who loves us and gave his life for us, grant to us such strong and confident faith in him as we come before him saying, “Lord, help me.” Amen.