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## Lent 2 One Year Series 2017

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## Lent II (Reminiscere)

This week you officially have Biblical permission to preach a crumby sermon. Of course you will have to be handing out the same crumbs that Jesus does to the Canaanite woman, namely salvation, healing, and rescue, but they were crumbs in the metaphor Matthew used.

Actually you also have something of a biblical permission to preach a scandalous sermon as well. Scandalous?! We don't usually see faith that way, but that seems to be the message for Matthew's readers today and for the preacher of this day. If we back up a little earlier into the Gospel according to Matthew and see what precedes this passage we find many connections. Peter reached into the basket for the bread two weeks ago that fed a multitude. Remember, there were lots of leftover crumbs from that event. Then Peter gets out of the boat to walk on water. Between then Jesus gets into something of a dust-up with the Pharisees about clean and unclean things, especially food. It isn't what goes into the mouth that makes one unclean. But the disciples don't get that. So Jesus seems to take them on a very long field trip to do an object lesson. This is the object lesson. Jesus invites all of us out of the boat of our own securities and traditions. He starts talking about some radical inclusiveness here.

This leads us to the truth that there is a scandalous feature to faith. God's love is even given to "them." The real question for the preacher might simply be to identify them. For the religious types at Matthew's time, it seems to have been the Canaanites, those ancient enemies of old whose barbarous worship practices had so enticed their forefathers that they went "whoring" after the Baals and the Asherahs. In the case of the ancient Canaanites, to call this whoring was not just metaphorical. Baal was the rain and storm God, another version of Zeus, but in Canaan, whose food supply was utterly dependent upon the arrival of late summer rains, this took a strange twist. The Canaanites seemed to believe that it rained when Baal and Asherah copulated.

When it was dry, the question became how to get god in the mood. This was crudely accomplished through temple prostitution, a peep show for the gods. The whole thing gave ancient Canaanite worship a pornographic sense, what one of my students once referred to as a certain "Hugh Hefner vibe." Of course, you can imagine this always appealed to the more juvenile-minded members of the society which were no less frequent then than they are today. This also meant that ancient Canaanites apparently did not share our struggle for involvement by the men in the congregation. I can only imagine that the same crew who gathers to watch *The Simpsons* twice a day in Portland would be pretty much into Baal worship. Of course, the Portlanders who assemble either to watch or participate in the world's largest naked bicycle parade might also be there. This crowd is probably also present in your city, no matter where it is.

You can also then understand the disgust with which the ancient Israelite prophets viewed this religion. Harry Wendt, the author of the *Crossways Bible Study*, once suggested that before the Exile 90% of Israelites worshiped Baal 90% of the time. After the exile, however, those numbers dropped dramatically. He estimates that only 10% of the people worshiped Baal 10% of the time. (He arrives at these numbers by analyzing the number of Baal figurines found in pre-exilic

Israelite homes and post-exilic Israelite homes.) The Exile worked, it purged the people of Israel from their idolatrous ways. By the time of Jesus and Matthew the Jews of the Roman Empire were noted as monotheists and radical monotheists at that. The Romans thought they were a little crazy in this. Not only did they dedicate themselves to one god, but they even went so far as to suggest that there were no other gods. To the Roman this just looked foolish because it seemed to put all your eggs in one basket. What if you were wrong?

When Jesus encounters the Canaanite woman in Matthew today, he is encountering not just a Canaanite but a “hated Canaanite.” The readers of Matthew’s Gospel would have known her through the lens of that great struggle conducted by the OT prophets like Hosea and Elijah and Elisha. She and her co-religionists were the reason they went into exile. She was the temptress who had seduced their forefathers away from the true faith. Joshua had been told to kill them all, but failed and that caused untold grief for the Jewish people. She was simply the worst of the worst in their eyes, a daughter of Jezebel. It is worth noting that when Mark tells this story to his largely gentile audience, he simply calls her a Syro-Phoenician woman, locates her geographically. Matthew calls her a Canaanite. It is the same place and no reason to doubt that this is the same woman in both accounts, but the historical name Canaanite is absolutely loaded for the Jewish reader. (Your congregation may also be interested to know that these people were also the ancient Phoenicians who set up a trading empire in the first millennium BC. Their reach extended all the way to North Africa where they established Carthage. Hannibal and his elephants crossing the Alps were a Canaanite army. Hannibal’s father, Barca, prepared for the eventual invasion of Italy by founding a forward base of operations in modern day Spain, the Punic/Canaanite word for such a base was “Iona.” Hence we have Barcelona today.)

This woman and Jesus’ treatment of her is a scandal. Jesus praises her faith, calling it great. He does not treat her as the disciples imagine he should, in fact he gives her praise that he gives to no Jew. None of the disciples are praised for their great faith Matthew. Only one other person is praised this way and that is a Roman Centurion (Matthew 8) which would have had much the same effect.

For the reader of the time, God’s blessing given through faith to these two paragons of evil would have been scandalous.

Who is the scandalous object of God’s love today? Is it the naked bicycle parade types? Is it the Moslem? Is it the man or woman who has torn your congregation to pieces by their loveless and mean spirited behavior and words? Is there anyone whom you find outside the realm of God’s ability to love? Yes, there are people who are going to Hell. I do not mean by this that all are saved, but as C. S. Lewis once said, the doors to Hell are locked on the inside first. God has always knocked on that door and pleaded for the inhabitants to turn around (repent) and come out. It is only in the face of stubborn rejection that God locks those doors from the outside. Hell is not a sign that God does not love some people. He loves them all and is grieved by their stubborn rejection of Him.

Who is on the other side of the door? Or perhaps we should ask whether I am on the other side of the door to someone else? Is there someone who hates me so? Does the homosexual hear the word conservative Christian and lump us all into the same homophobic pigeon hole? Does the Moslem see the scantily clad women of Madison Avenue and in his reaction lose sight of the fact that there are members of this society who also are uncomfortable with the way we portray women?

I find it interesting that there was once a day when Israelites did worship at the Baal sites but gradually that came to be corrupted. What was once permissible was eventually considered evil. It crept up on them. I think this means we constantly have to be aware that the realities which obtained in our grandfather's day may not always obtain for us. Some things never change, Jesus is the same, but the preaching of Christ does in fact change as each generation changes. My grandfather, after all, once firmly believed that life insurance was an evil lack of trust in God and a profiting from death. Where would we be without Thrivent today? Was my grandfather right?

### **Collect of the Day**

O God, You see that of ourselves we have no strength. By Your mighty power defend us from all adversities that may happen to the body and from all evil thoughts that may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

*We have no strength. Is any modern person really able to say that? Whole religious movements are dedicated to the power to "choose." That choice is perceived as power. Whether the choice is to end a life in an abortion or the power to choose Jesus and open your heart to him, the vocabulary betrays that is all about the empowerment of the person.*

*The prayer, however, suggests another anthropology than that which obtains in the world today. We are helpless, much like the little children Jesus welcomed into his arms whose nature Jesus said was essential to entering the kingdom of God. They were not innocent, those little children, any more than my own children are innocent. They were helpless and weak and powerless. Jesus came to raise dead people, not to buy drinks for the marginally alive. He raises the dead, so hurry up and die already! At least stop counting on our own strength to carry us through. Strong faith that looks to itself is not strong, but grotesquely misguided. Strength of faith is found in my own weakness and need for the strength of God for me. Strong faith is looking to God for strength.*

*By God's mighty power we ask to be defended from all adversities that happen to the body and the evil thoughts that may assault and hurt the soul. The dualism aside, the prayer seems at first blush to fit better with the reading last week in which Jesus overcomes the tempter, but this is actually building on that event.*

*The adversities of the body are pretty straight forward and if you have ever spoken to an elderly person only to get an "organ report" you know just how serious the adversities of the body can be. For Christians of every time, of course, this also includes those persecutions which are not part of our common human existence but which are peculiar to our confession of Christ.*

*The evil thoughts that assault and hurt the soul, on the other hand, are a little tougher to understand. Obviously this includes the lusts and the hatreds that may deform our actions into sinful behaviors, but that is only the tip of the iceberg here. That is the obvious part of it, beneath it is a vast chunk of sin which is hidden in our minds and over which comes the veneer of respectability. Concupiscence is the term we use for much of this. We have an inner compulsion to sin and quite often we are so used to that we think it is normal. We may even make a virtue of it. Is capitalism and the philosophy of the free market simply greed harnessed? How much of our humor is not at another's expense? How much of our success is not predicated upon another's harm? The stock market dictum "buy low, sell high" is predicated on someone foolishly doing the opposite.*

*What do we put into our hearts and our heads? Why is it so much easier to read a chapter out of a trashy novel than the Bible? What images do the films and television shows we watch put into our heads? Do they lead us to sin or righteousness? We may argue that we do not act on those things, so they are relatively harmless, but if they are leading us one way and we are expending our energy resisting them, is that really something we want to do?*

*Our thoughts themselves can be sinful too. Jesus' explores this in some depth in the Sermon on the Mount. It is not only the act of harming my neighbor that is a sin, but also the hatred and envy. This is what the ninth and tenth commandments are really about, our attitudes toward our neighbor. Paul's injunction to humility in Philippians 2 is really contradicting both first century Roman culture and 21<sup>st</sup> century American culture with their emphasis on competition and success, a theology of Glory. Paul calls us to weep with our neighbor in his distress and to rejoice with him in his success. Our culture delights in laughing at our neighbor's problems and grumbling about his success as if it were owed to us.*

*We want Jesus to control our minds too? That is a pretty scary thing for a person to say, especially since the enlightenment which has so emphasized the mental capacity of the human being. But this gets clearer when one remembers the love which Jesus has expressed to us. The one to whom we would submit even our minds is the one who submitted to the will of his own Father on the cross. He knows the struggle that a human being has when confronted with radical obedience of this sort. He has done it himself.*

*That is why this prayer is really a prayer of faith. Only faith can pray it, at least honestly.*

## **Readings**

Genesis 32:22-32

<sup>22</sup> The same night he arose and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. <sup>23</sup> He took them and sent them across the stream, and everything else that he had. <sup>24</sup> And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. <sup>25</sup> When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. <sup>26</sup> Then he said, "Let

me go, for the day has broken.” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.”<sup>27</sup> And he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.”<sup>28</sup> Then he said, “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.”<sup>29</sup> Then Jacob asked him, “Please tell me your name.” But he said, “Why is it that you ask my name?” And there he blessed him.<sup>30</sup> So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered.”<sup>31</sup> *The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.*<sup>32</sup> *Therefore to this day the people of Israel do not eat the sinew of the thigh that is on the hip socket, because he touched the socket of Jacob's hip on the sinew of the thigh.*

*There is a simple truth which we might miss in this text. In order to wrestle with someone, you have to be close and they have to be close to you. You cannot wrestle from afar or at a distance. At the end of this passage, when Jacob said that he had seen God face to face, that would not be an exaggeration for a wrestler, nor would it be a distant sighting. This would be face to or even upon face.*

*This is one of the great stories and pivot points of the whole book of Genesis. From the beginning of the narrative section of this book, after the introduction of creation and fall, there has been this great sin hanging over the whole book. Cain's brutal murder of Abel has never really been resolved. In the story of Jacob and his twin brother, Esau, this brother on brother behavior returns. We simply have different ideas about family than the ancient, more tribal world thought about brothers. Your brother is the closest member of your tribe. It is perfectly acceptable to cheat and lie and steal from those outside the tribe. It might even be considered virtuous in many tribal communities. This has always frustrated westerners who come to tribal communities. But if tribalists will cheat the outsider they have intense loyalty to their fellow tribesman, especially their own brother. What Jacob has done to Esau in cheating him and that Esau has threatened to kill Jacob strikes at the very heart of their community.*

*Esau has threatened to repeat Cain's crime against his thieving and lying twin, Jacob. He would kill him. In the scene which follows this strange event in chapter 32, Esau and Jacob will be reconciled and Jacob will say “To see your face now that you have received me is like seeing the face of God.” That is significant, because according to our text here, he knows what God looks like. And it is true. To look into the face of a human being who is forgiving you is looking into the face of God.*

*Genesis is like that, a masterful text. Jacob, who stole his brother's identity, is now given a new name. The same Jacob, whose strength single handedly moved the great stone from the well when he met Rachel, was bested in a wrestling match by a mysterious stranger. God who revealed himself to Jacob in visions at night and through angels as he journeys now reveals his face to Jacob in a fight, an “angel” who disappears at dawn.*

*But this text is important for a number of reasons. In chapter 28 of Genesis Jacob had made a deal with God. If God would care for him, take care of his life, feed him, clothe him, bring him*

*safely back to his father's land, then God would have the privilege of being Jacob's God. This sounds too much like me!*

*As chapter 32 of Genesis opens, God has kept his end of the bargain. When Jacob crosses back over the river Jabbok here he will re-enter the promised land of his father. The final element of the deal that Jacob made is now complete, God has returned him to the land of his father, the land promised to Abraham. Obviously, having fulfilled his end of the bargain, God has arrived to collect. The wrestling match will end with God re-naming Jacob – Israel. One names people over whom you have some claim of ownership, usually a child. God is literally claiming what Jacob had pledged at Bethel – Jacob himself.*

*There is yet more in this text. Notice the method of God. He does not win the wrestling match! Jacob has him pinned and thinks that he is extracting a concession when he gets the new name. He has wrestled with God and with men and has prevailed. His new name tells the story. He has bested God. There is some rich incarnational stuff in this. God losing the battle here sounds much like Christ losing the battle on the cross only to have the ultimate victory. So too here, God wins by losing. A careful reading of the Jacob story reveals that prior to this, Jacob does not refer to God ever as “My God,” but only through the carefully worded “The God of my father...” or “The Lord, your God.” He meticulously avoids ever calling God, “My God.” After this event, he consistently refers to God as “my God.” This wrestling match is Jacob's conversion event. He gets a new name, just like we are given one in baptism. Christ has come and lost the battle that we might be winners of far more than we ever imagined, heaven itself.*

*What is perhaps not so obvious from this text is that Jacob has come to this event in terror. In the preceding verses he divided his family in half lest Esau, who was coming with 400 men, fall on them all and slay them. His hope was that half his children might survive. That is pretty desperate. Yet, this mysterious God who shows up in strange wrestling matches, shows up again a few verses after this event, when Esau takes him in his strong embrace and forgives him. Jacob says that too is seeing the face of God, the same God who wrestled and lost and claimed him just a few hours before.*

*Then there is the name which God bestows on Jacob: Israel. Consider Paul's words in Galatians in which he declares that we are all Children of Abraham. He does not call us the “Abrahamites” but he calls us the Israel of faith. Israel got his name in this scene. He became Israel when he came to faith. The inclusion in the children of Israel is not a bloodline but a faithline distinction. That is not new with Paul or Jesus for that matter. It was written into the very Torah. This is why Paul in Galatians will assert that his proclamation is in fact the authentic Jewish faith. Christianity and its adherents in their earliest struggle with Judaism appeared to be contending that they were the more accurate readers of the Torah than the Pharisees and the Rabbis who followed them. Jesus is the authentic son of Israel and we are as well because we share the faith of Abraham and the faith of Jesus.*

**Sermon Idea:** Persistent in Love (OT: That the hearer would believe that God has pursued them, far beyond simply establishing a claim upon us, he has pursued our hearts and minds and

whole selves, so that he may hold us in His loving embrace, give us a new name, and make us his own.)

God exhorts us to persistent prayer, but perhaps we would be much more persistent in prayer if we realized the depth of his persistent love for us. Consider the story of Jacob whose narrative reaches an important climax in today's text. Jacob was the twin son of Isaac and thus dear Abraham's grandson. In the shadow of his elder brother Esau who was a great hunter and "manly" man, Jacob was raised by his mother in the tents.

He seemed to bear a significant chip on his shoulder. He deceived his foolish brother, essentially stole Esau's birthright for a bowl of soup, deceived his father and stole Esau's blessings. When things were so hot in his father's home that Esau was ready to kill him, he ran away to his uncle, and the whole pattern played out again. Within a couple of decades his cousins and uncle were so angry with him that he thought it best to leave.

On the outbound part of his flight from Esau to Laban, (Gen 28) he had a vision. And at Bethel he made a vow, a contract with God. It was manipulative Jacob at his best (worst!). If God would take care of him, feed him, clothe him, and finally bring him safely to his home, then God would have the privilege of being Jacob's God. I think most of us, if we were God, would have counted that as a singularly worthless honor. But God is not like the wicked judge in the Gospel and he is not like us either. He loved the stinker Jacob despite his arrogance, deceitfulness, and blind stupidity.

In this reading we find the pursuing God, the one who has bound Jacob with a "deal" in which Jacob is supposed to win and God is the loser. That God has come to collect. All night Jacob tries to weasel out of God's grasp. All night they grapple and fight with one another. Of course God could smash Jacob like a bug. But then the heart and life he has always loved would be snuffed out. So God refuses to "win" and yet in losing the wrestling match gains what he has always wanted – Jacob himself. From this day forward he will always call God "my God."

God will reveal himself to Jacob immediately in the forgiveness of his brother.

This God is pursuing us as well, is he not? Has he not even listened to our foolish prayers, has he not lost the battle with death on a cross so that he may embrace us in his arms as well. Has he not given us the new name in our baptism and claimed us as his own. Even now, is he not pursuing us that we may be his own and live under him in his kingdom in everlasting innocence, righteousness and blessedness?

We wondered if fire and brimstone has its limitations here. Does the preaching of repentance really involve the invitation to return to the God who loves us and whom we know love us. Could this sermon really encourage the Christian in the life to which God has called them, one which frequently finds us oscillating as sinner/saint.



I lift up my eyes to the hills.

From where does my help come?

<sup>2</sup> My help comes from the LORD,  
who made heaven and earth.

<sup>3</sup> He will not let your foot be moved;  
he who keeps you will not slumber.

<sup>4</sup> Behold, he who keeps Israel  
will neither slumber nor sleep.

<sup>5</sup> The LORD is your keeper;  
the LORD is your shade on your right hand.

<sup>6</sup> The sun shall not strike you by day,  
nor the moon by night.

<sup>7</sup> The LORD will keep you from all evil;  
he will keep your life.

<sup>8</sup> The LORD will keep  
your going out and your coming in  
from this time forth and forevermore.

*This is one of the traditional funeral psalms. It will have a real resonance for some members and has several beautiful settings which a choir or a good hymn might help you with. It is also a baptismal text which has many Lenten resonances.*

*You may also want to play with the security piece here. God's watching is a very good thing, according to the psalmist, but is that the way most of us think of this. God watching me sounds like big brother is watching. Recent disclosures about the NSA particularly make us aware of this. What about my privacy? Christians admit they have none, at least none from God. That is a nicely counter-cultural message, especially when you say that Christians are not only OK with this snooping God, they positively delight in it. Yes that means he knows everything about me, even my sins and problems, but it also means that his declaration of love for me is not made in ignorance or misconception. He knows all about me, perhaps better than even I do. Yet, He still loves me.*

I Thessalonians 4:1-7

Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more. <sup>2</sup> For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. <sup>3</sup> For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; <sup>4</sup> that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, <sup>5</sup> not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do

not know God; <sup>6</sup> that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. <sup>7</sup> For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. <sup>8</sup> Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.

<sup>9</sup> Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another, <sup>10</sup> for that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more, <sup>11</sup> and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, <sup>12</sup> so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one.

*This passage appears in the three year lectionary toward the end of the Pentecost season in year C. I have included edited notes from last fall's treatment of this text.*

*Paul writes to the good people of Thessalonica. They are worked up about the end of the world, they are afraid and it is distorting their lives. Paul does not tell them that the end is not happening, nor does he tell them there is nothing to be afraid of. The wrath of God comes, but Jesus rescues from that wrath. On the last day, when all seems lost, Paul will boast about them before all the hosts of heaven (see 2:17-20). Paul has assured them that God establishes their hearts and lives as blameless in the judgment (3:11-13).*

*Here Paul starts to unpack what it means that this is true. It means that their lives in this time and this place, lived out in the reality of the promised end of the world are marked by Christ-like love, compassion, service, and holiness. The end comes, it is true, but we live out of the righteousness that Christ established by his work. For Paul that means we don't get ourselves all worked up about the impending doom of the world. The polar caps might melt and the world might become some post-apocalyptic hell. We don't contribute to that, but we also don't get all worked up about it. We love, we serve, we mind our own affairs, work with what is before us to make it better.*

*I love this text because Paul is really sanctifying the normal life. I am not called to be a hero or a person who does something really dramatic. The call to be a normal person is just as holy and good and may in fact be better. The anonymity of loving one's spouse, raising your kids, doing a good job at work, and simply minding your own business may in fact be the better road than the infamy of reality television.*

**Sermon Idea:** No heroes here, just saints (Epistle: That the Holy Spirit would break the notion that we serve God best through the exercise of power and might, instead proclaiming God's holy presence in the wholeness of the human life lived in baptismal grace.)

The theme here is similar to the first sermon but looking at the same truth from another angle. Paul writes to people who are afraid and somewhat agitated by the truth. God is coming in power and glory. The angelic armies will wage victorious combat, the forces of Satan and this world will flee before His right and might. At the time some were living as if that day were right around the corner. Were they not paying their bills? Were they making distinctions? We don't

know exactly how this played out, but from reading Paul we get the idea that they were worked up.

Paul enjoins them to see their lives here differently in light of God's final judgment, but not as they were doing. The kingdom of God does not wait for that last day but it was proclaimed on the first Easter by Jesus himself. It was empowered by the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. And now it rules in the lives of God's people today.

In this day and age, we often imagine that the reality of God's kingdom to come means I need to undertake some heroic effort. The picture of folks who have been convinced that the world is about to end is persistent. They sell their goods, make some heroic gift to the poor, they don a white robe of an ascetic and become a hermit. They live some heroic life. I am not suggesting that these are all bad things to do, but they are not really the person prepared for the end. The person prepared for the end is living out the very kingdom which is to come because it has already come.

Paul describes a Christian who is ready for Jesus. Such a person is living a saintly life, not a heroic life. He or she is caring for children, loving spouse, tending to their own business, not poking a nose over the fence into the neighbor's garden and life. Paul does not speak of heroic deeds, but every day deeds. This is how the coming kingdom is seen today. This is how Christ shows up and changes this world.

Yes, this means we avoid the impurities of this world. We live lives marked by love and service, not by scandal, immorality, and drunkenness. But it also means we go about the lives God has given us to lead, aware that they are right now filled with the love and presence of Christ. They are not perfect, but he makes them perfect in his forgiveness and love. They have become the vehicles for his good in this world. I may be changing diapers, helping a neighbor fix his car, taking my kids to school, or watching a football game. They are all times and places in which Christ also is found in me.

No heroes here, just saints.

Or Romans 5:1-5

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>2</sup> Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. <sup>3</sup> Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, <sup>4</sup> and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, <sup>5</sup> and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

<sup>6</sup> *For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.* <sup>7</sup> *For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—* <sup>8</sup> *but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

*In the three year lectionary, we get this reading extended to verse 8 next week, the third Sunday in Lent in series A. I have included lightly modified notes from three years ago.*

*Paul understands that God is not responding to our goodness, he is saving us despite our badness, despite the real evil that has lurked in our hearts every day of our lives. The salvation of God comes to us in our weakness, while we are sinners. This means that even in our weakness, in the things that we naturally perceive of as bad, perhaps the suffering we bring on ourselves because of our own foolishness, we can rejoice. God has died for the lot of it. Suffering is no longer seen as a punishment from God but a bit of pedagogy. He is working through these things to help and heal too. It doesn't feel like that at the time, and I would not recommend telling this to folks who are suffering, but you can prepare them for the suffering which comes to us all. You can give them perspective on past suffering. God was at work even then.*

*All this flows out of the peace that comes to us through the faithful relationship established in Christ. God's love has been poured into the emptiness of our hearts through the Holy Spirit. Lose the idea that this is reciprocal. God's love is not, it starts as a completely one way street, it starts on a cross where Jesus dies for the sins of the world.*

*This sounds altogether too good to be true. Christ died for us while we were enemies? Don't we at least have to show some inclination to be saved? Don't we have to at least ask him into our hearts? But then again, who would expect to get water from a rock, it is not supposed to be that easy. You need to dig wells like Jacob had to, you cannot just take your stick and whack the rock and get water! You can if God is in that picture. Just remember this passage from another of Paul's letters about the rock which Moses strikes above. If you think you have understood this reading from Exodus, think again.*

*1 Cor. 10:1-4 (ESV)*

*I want you to know, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, [2] and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, [3] and all ate the same spiritual food, [4] and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ.*

*I have this image of a rock following the children of Israel around in the desert, some great boulder rolling along, pushed by some angel. Paul was simply reflecting the very careful reading of his fellow Pharisees who had noticed that the Bible spoke of water coming from "the" rock in two different places. Because the text used the word "the" it had to be the same rock, therefore it must have moved. Had we heard the Rabbi's talk this way, most of us would have scoffed at it. But here it is in our New Testament, from the very pen of Paul. The rock that followed them was none other than Christ.*

*Verse 2 has that interesting phrase: in which we stand. Have you ever wondered why we stand up for the Gospel reading or to pray? Not out of respect. That is what most people think we are doing, much like when a judge enters a court room. In the ancient world one showed respect by*

*bowing down, and the greater the personage, the lower you bowed. The Romans actually had a whole system which dictated the proper sorts of bows and genuflections to make when various officials walked past. We stand because we have peace with God, we have son-ship bestowed on us. We stand by right. We are the sons of the King and stand in his presence. Of course, sometimes we kneel like a servant, bow, and otherwise fill that role as well.*

*The passage dwells on the three gifts of God: Faith, Hope, and Love. They are connected and the relationship they have to one another is important. It is not that one precedes the others, but they are mutually reinforcing of one another. Faith hopes, and hope “faiths.” Likewise, love is faithful and faith is loving. They simply are not found in this theological sense independently of one another. It is through faith, the relationship which God establishes through the Spirit that we are saved, but that faith is always accompanied by God’s outpoured love and the hopeful expectation of God’s goodness.*

Matthew 15:21-28

<sup>21</sup> And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. <sup>22</sup> And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon.” <sup>23</sup> But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, “Send her away, for she is crying out after us.” <sup>24</sup> He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” <sup>25</sup> But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” <sup>26</sup> And he answered, “It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.” <sup>27</sup> She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.” <sup>28</sup> Then Jesus answered her, “O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

**Luther** *(I have included rather lengthy section of this sermon because Luther’s treatment is so potent and because of the material at the end of this passage from Luther. )*

1. This Gospel presents to us a true example of firm and perfect faith. For this woman endures and overcomes in three great and hard battles, and teaches us in a beautiful manner the true way and virtue of faith, namely, that it is a hearty trust in the grace and goodness of God as experienced and revealed through his Word. For St. Mark says she heard some news about Jesus, Mk. 7:25. What kind of news? Without doubt good news, and the good report that Christ was a pious man and cheerfully helped everybody. Such news about God is a true Gospel and a word of grace, out of which sprang the faith of this woman; for had she not believed, she would not have thus run after Christ etc. In like manner we have often heard how St. Paul in Rom 10:17 says that faith cometh by hearing, that the Word must go in advance and be the beginning of our salvation.

2. But how is that many more have heard this good news concerning Christ, who have not followed him, and did not esteem it as good news? Answer: The physician is helpful and

welcome to the sick; the healthy have no use for him. But this woman felt her need, hence she followed the sweet scent, as it written in the Song of Solomon 1:3. In like manner Moses must precede and teach people to feel their sins in order that grace may be sweet and welcome to them. Therefore all is in vain, if man is not first humbled by a knowledge of himself and he possesses no long for Christ...All this is spoken and written for the comfort of the distressed, the poor, the needy, the sinful, the despised, so that they may know in all times of need to whom to flee and where to seek comfort and help.

3. But see in this example how Christ like a hunter exercises and chases faith in his followers in order that it may become strong and firm. First when the woman follows him upon hearing of his fame and cries with assured confidence that he would according to his reputation deal mercifully with her, for Christ certainly acts differently, as if to let her faith and good confidence be in vain and turn his good reputation into a lie, so that she could have thought: Is this the gracious, friendly man? Or: Are these the good words, that I have heard spoken about him, upon which I have depended? It must not be true; he is my enemy and will not receive me; nevertheless he might speak a word and tell me that he will have nothing to do with me. Now he is as silent as a stone. Behold, this is a very hard rebuff, when God appears so earnest and angry and conceals his grace so high and deep; as those know so well, who feel and experience it in their hearts. Therefore she imagines he will not fulfil what he has spoken, and will let his Word be false; as it happened to the children of Israel at the Red Sea and to many other saints.

4. Now, what does this poor woman do? She turns her eyes from all this unfriendly treatment of Christ; all this does not lead her astray, neither does she take it to heart, but she continues immediately and firmly to cling in her confidence to the good news she had heard and embraced concerning him, and never gives up. We must also do the same and learn firmly to cling to the Word, even though God with all his creatures appears different than his Word teaches. But, oh, how painful it is to nature and reason, that this woman should strip herself of self and forsake all that she experienced, and cling alone to God's bare Word, until she experienced the contrary. May God help us in time of need and of death to possess like courage and faith!

5. Secondly, since her cry and faith avail nothing, the disciples approach with their faith, and pray for her, and imagine they will surely be heard. But while they thought he should be more tenderhearted, he became only the more indifferent, as we see and think. For now he is silent no more nor leaves them in doubt; he declines their prayer and says: "I was not sent but unto the lost sheep of house of Israel." This rebuff is still harder since not only our own person is rejected, but the only comfort that remains to us, namely, the comfort and prayers of pious and holy persons, are rejected. For our last resort, when we feel that god is ungracious or we are in need, is that we go to pious, spiritual persons and there seek counsel and help, and they are

willing to help as love demands; and yet, that may amount to nothing, even they may not be heard and our condition becomes only worse

6. Here one might upbraid Christ with all the words in which he promises to hear his saints, as Mt. 18:19: "If two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them." Likewise, Mk. 11:24: "All things whatsoever ye pray and ask for, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them;" and many more like passages. What becomes of such promises in this woman's case? Christ, however, promptly answers these promises only to the house of Israel. What do you think? Is not that a thunderbolt that dashes both heart and faith into a thousand pieces, when one feels that God's Word, upon which one trusts, was not spoken for him, but applies only to others? Here all saints and prayers must be speechless, yea, here the heart must let go of the Word, to which it would gladly hold, if it would consult its own feelings.

7. But what does the poor woman do? She does not give up, she clings to the Word although it be torn out of her heart by force, is not turned away by this stern answer, still firmly believes his goodness is yet concealed in that answer, and still she will not pass judgment that Christ is or may be ungracious. This is persevering steadfastness.

8. Thirdly, she follows Christ into the house, as Mark 7:24-25 informs us, perseveres, falls down at his feet, and says, "Lord, help me!" There she received her last mortal blow, in that Christ said in her face, as the words tell, that she was a dog, and not worthy to partake of the children's bread. What will she say to this? Here he presents her in a bad light, she is condemned and an outcast person, who is not to be reckoned among God's chosen ones.

9. That is an extremely unanswerable reply, to which no one can give a satisfactory answer. Yet she does not despair, but agrees with his judgment and concedes she is a dog, and desires also no more than a dog is entitled to, namely, that she may eat the crumbs that fall from the table of the Lord. Is not that a masterly stroke as a reply? She catches Christ with his own words. He compares her to a dog, she concedes it, and asks nothing more than that he let her be a dog, as he himself judged her to be. Where will Christ now take refuge? He is caught. Truly, people let the dog have the crumbs under the table; it is entitled to that. Therefore Christ now completely opens heart to her and yields to her will, so that she is now no dog, but even a child of Israel.

10. All this, however, is written for our comfort and instruction, that we may know how deeply God conceals his grace before our face, and that we may not estimate him according to our feelings and thinking, but strictly according to his Word. For here you see, though Christ appears to be even hardhearted, yet he gives no final decision by saying "No." All his answers indeed sound like no, but they are not no, they remain undecided and pending...Yet all those trial of her faith sounded more like a no than yes; but there one more yea in them than nay; ay,

there is only yes in them, but it is very deep and very concealed, while there appears to be nothing but no.

*(Sermons of Martin Luther, Vol. 2. Baker Publishing, 2000. Pp. 148-154.)*

*We consider this text in the three year cycle in the Sundays after Pentecost, Series A, it falls in mid-August. I have included the notes from the last time we dealt with this passage.*

*This is a strange text to modern ears and the preacher needs to take that into account. I went into some detail about this passage in the opening essay, so I don't want to rehash that here. Jesus at first does not listen to this woman. Then, at the urging of his disciples he addresses her, but consider at what he says! Jesus calls this woman a dog. This is not nice talk here and we have been conditioned to believe that Jesus approves of us using nice words and thus he must speak nicely himself. In this hyper-sensitive age, calling someone a dog is not considered by some to be Christian and here is Christ doing this. This could be "hate speech."*

*What is going on? I believe this text lies at the heart of this whole section of deeds and actions of Jesus. Sandwiched between chapter 13 with its parables of a radically different kingdom from expectation and then followed by Jesus discourse on forgiveness in chapter 18, this is the narrative pillar that ties both of these sections together and gathers together several threads from the surrounding accounts.*

*A look through the earlier context of this passage suggests that there is something also going on with the food image. Remember in the prior chapter, Jesus fed the five thousand and there were more left-over pieces than there was food at the beginning? In the chapter which follows this account, Jesus will feed the four thousand with the same result. Is it a coincidence that Jesus is talking here about food with this woman, food and leftover crumbs? Is one of the points of the feeding miracles that there are plenty of leftovers here, enough for the whole world?*

*Shortly before this in Matthew's narrative, Jesus has been in a dispute with the Pharisees about clean and unclean, kosher and Sabbath keeping. It is not what goes into the mouth that makes one unclean, asserts Jesus, but what comes out. Look at what comes out of this woman's mouth. Is it clean or unclean? Jesus calls it great faith.*

*My contention is that the real objects of all this strange behavior by Jesus in this section is not the woman and her daughter; although, surely they would dispute that. I believe, however, that as Matthew presents this the real objects of Jesus actions here are the disciples and his first century readers and of course us. The kingdom's net pulls in all sorts of people. It is a mustard seed sort of place, seed cast far and wide and sometimes that seed bears fruit. Like yeast it does not look like it should work, but God has given up all for treasures hidden where you might least expect them. Jesus, searching for his pearls, has found one of great price and really wants his disciples to see that.*

*And so Jesus does not speak to her. Why not? I cannot psychoanalyze Jesus. But clearly there is something going on here. His silence is not met with reciprocal silence from the woman, but she*



*ratchets things up. Finally the disciples tell Jesus to send her away. They probably mean that he should do what she asks because they are weary of all the wailing. And so Jesus turns his attention to her. She might have wished that he remained silent because he essentially calls her a dog. It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs. I came for the lost sheep of Israel.*

*At this point all the Jewish types, including the disciples, are nodding in agreement. This is the logic of their world. God has a chosen people, and while there can be righteous gentiles, this woman is clearly not one of them. She is a dog. But Jesus already knows this woman. He has already found this treasure. He is just claiming what his life's blood is about to buy. She responds with this marvelously witty comeback. "Yes, but even the dogs get a crumb."*

*All I want is a crumb, a little piece of bread that has fallen from the master's table. Just a crumb! She has not disappointed Jesus, indeed she has evidenced a faith he has found sorely lacking in his fellow Jews. He smiles at her and gives her what her heart yearns for and gives the disciples an important lesson as he does. Her faith is great. Remember just a few verses early when Jesus was walking on the water and Peter started to sink? Do you remember what Jesus said to him? "Oh, you of little faith, why did you doubt?"*

*What makes this woman's faith so great and what makes Peter's so little? We were drawn to the idea that this woman was here praying for her daughter. One of the Tuesday regulars, Armenio, preaches to men in a prison, their mothers, wives, girlfriends, and others are praying for them too. In Latino culture often women are at the bottom of the social pecking order, often the least educated, but this woman knows who Jesus is, knows that Jesus can help her daughter. She has learned the lesson.*

*After all, we admitted that it took some faith for Peter to get out of that boat, perhaps more than I can find if I turn my gaze inward. What makes our faith great and what makes it small? Faith small as a mustard seed can move a mountain. It is God who works through faith and he has all the power that it needs, but still, there is an advantage, a good thing to having a strong faith. What makes it strong? Is it not that the woman holds Jesus to his own words. She listens to what he says and "catches" him in his own words as Luther says above. "Yes, I am a dog, I know it, but even the dogs get the crumbs."*

*How shall we catch our Lord in his word? First of all, that means listening very closely to what he says and taking him at that word. But then it means having the boldness and the confidence to hold him to it. It means kneeling at that rail and holding up that wafer and saying to God – "You promised! You promised that when I eat this my sins are forgiven. You promised that when I eat this you come to me and make me one with you and all your people. You promised to dwell in my life and make it more like your life. You promised!" God loves it when we hold him to his promises. Faith means walking out the doors of our church and believing him when he says he goes with us and works through us for the salvation of our neighbor and our friends and our family. And so that means opening our mouth and giving God a few words to work with inside those relationships.*

*Faith means believing Jesus when he said he died for all the sins, all of them, even the ones that really hurt me, even the ones that really shame me. Faith means listening and acting on what you hear. For the disciples faith meant treating the Canaanites differently. They were no longer an enemy. Christ had died for them – see Paul’s eloquent discourse on this in Ephesians 2. Salvation by grace through faith without works means that the dividing wall of hostility is broken down. Jesus himself is our peace. For Matthew’s audience, persecuted by their Jewish neighbors and family, it meant that they might believe Jesus and find their community among the gentiles who worshiped the same God and ate ham sandwiches at their church potlucks.*

*Who are the dogs in our society? In the course of discussing this passage we have had occasion to speak of women who had been sexually abused. What are these women calling themselves? What words do they use, if they even articulate their shame? The man who has no job, and there are lots of those, what words are there to describe them? Unemployed – is there a positive thing we can say? We try, but what does one say to this? What about the chronically unemployed?*

*What hurts are there in minority cultures? Are they lying so deep under the surface that we cannot actually even articulate. Are there people in our audience who have a shame which is their “name” which they are afraid to speak? Jesus calls the woman a dog, she does not deny it, but she gets the “crumb” she needs.*

*So what is the Law and Gospel to our congregations? His disciples seem to think that their Jewishness makes them somehow more acceptable to God. Jesus constructs this whole scenario for their instruction, to disabuse them of this notion. He draws out of this woman these words because he would demonstrate to them the truth of what he had been saying to the Scribes and Pharisees in the section of Matthew immediately prior to this. The Gospel for these disciples is that Jesus teaches them. Is that really the Gospel for our people as well, as we sit in our churches and imagine that God somehow loves us more than the homeless guy standing at the top of the exit ramp with a cardboard sign or the woman down the street who is a serial polygamist on her fifth husband, or...this list could go on.*

**Sermon Idea:** Counting on God (Gospel – That the Holy Spirit would make us confident, even bold in our relationship with God.)

God is the ultimate Tetris player. He flips us around and finds us the perfect spot in his kingdom, gives us a name that is everlasting. He can even find room in there for a Canaanite woman with a demoniac daughter (she probably deserved it! Demoniacs always begin as willing participants in the evil in which they find themselves. Was she that “Goth” girl who lives down the street, wears black all the time and has multiple tattoos and piercings?)

Of course we might wonder if there is a spot for us in this kingdom of God, really. After all, we perhaps have fooled the preacher, even our own family, but deep inside we know what is in there and we don’t like it. God knows it too and we are very afraid of that truth. But we can be sure of this. There is no sin in that blackened heart of mine which is bigger and tougher than the shed

blood of Christ. That blood and that Savior take sinners and do amazing things, including you and your sins.

But this has a rather scandalous implication for us. We, like this woman, can trap Jesus in his own promises. He actually invites and likes us to do that. He wants us to hold him to the promises which he made in this supper which we eat here. He promises to forgive our sins, strengthen us and encourage us. Own that wafer and hold God to his promise. You can take that to the bank and cash it. Be bold with that promise.

And when we leave this place, we also are bold. Confident in the loving-kindness of God and his great mercy for sinners, we are bold to go forth from these doors into the world to which God has called us and made us witnesses. Our fears and our enemy tempts us to silence, but God has already lovingly accepted us and mercifully worked with our words in the past. Our relationship with God is not hanging on our success as witnesses and his success as a gatherer of people is not hanging on the eloquence of our words. He can work with some pretty strange stuff. Remember, he makes odd shaped stones into his corner stone and builds us into a temple for His Spirit. We are bold witnesses because we count on his promises.

We are also emboldened to be risk takers in other ways. We are no longer afraid to lose. We have the ultimate safety net under us. Christians are bold and courageous because we are confident in the love of Christ. Nothing that happens in my life can change the fact of the cross and the love of God which he has expressed therein. I can love the unlovable neighbor, I can try to mediate the impossible fight, I can forgive the unforgivable sin.

This text makes us bold even with God. Like the woman who was seemingly rebuffed, we can speak honestly and hold him to his word. He has made amazing promises to us and loves it when we hold him to them. He invites us to be bold with him in this regard. God loves it when we catch him in his own promises. Hold that wafer aloft and say, "God, You promised!" Walk into that tough situation and pray, "God, You promised to be with me here. I am counting on you!" Talk to the guy you hate and remember that Jesus prayed for the guys who hated him from the cross and enjoined us to do the same. He is smiling to see you join him in loving despite the antipathy. Count on him.

This text may also help us speak to the women in the congregation – Jesus heals the daughter. He values her. We can count on the promises of God this way too. He has numbered the hairs of our head and notices when even a sparrow falls to the ground. He promises to love you.

**Another Sermon Idea:** God's Scandalous Love! (Gospel: That the Love of God would overwhelm the prejudices and fears which close our mouths and isolate us from our fellow human beings.)

This sermon makes a basic assumption. We are all bigots of a sort. We may not fall into the classic mold of a racial bigot who hates a whole segment of humanity, but we all have our prejudices and bigotries, usually born of our fears. The law development will need to ask carefully what those fears and those hatreds are. Are we a country club sort of congregation that

only lets in the “right sort” of people? How is it that our town is 25% Hispanic but we have not a single Latino in our midst? Where are the “others” in our ministry? It may not be quite as obvious as one might think. The greatest negative passions are often reserved for the folks who are the closest to us.

But the general thrust of the sermon is not a scold about who we are, but a witness to who Christ is. He loves them all, every one of us and them. His blood was human blood, shed one drop at a time on the cross of Calvary. Everyone whose blood runs red through their veins shares in that humanity for which he has died, no matter what we think of them. In fact, so real is that blood of Jesus that it changes our thinking of them.

This is what Jesus had in mind with the Canaanite woman, and I would simply tell that account in this sermon. It is gripping and well done by Matthew. My students in my classes love this story. The application of this should not be difficult, in fact, sometimes it is almost better not to make it too clear, your folks are pretty good at applying these sorts of things to their lives. What you do want to do is really portray Jesus as the great lover of sinners, all of them, even to the point that he uses this woman to teach this lesson to his disciples. I think they will get the point that we might just be as hard to love as the folks whom we think are hard to love – the disciples thought they were inside and hence lovable, but it is the Canaanite woman who comes off looking better in this story.

This sermon is best preached to the congregation which has the first sermon down. If you don't have sermon idea 1 in place, this sermon will be difficult.