

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost – 2023

Isaiah 56:1, 6-8

Romans 11:1-2a, 13-15, 28-32

Matthew 15:21-28

In 2019, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland came out with a statement of support for a “pride” event. Pride is a colloquialism for deviant sexual behavior. So, the State Church of Finland, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland published an official statement in support of that which God, in His Word, has identified as contrary to His will. A Finnish woman, Päivi Räsänen, recognized that the church was theologically sick and she responded publically with a quotation from the book of Romans. Interestingly, this lady was a long-standing member of the Finnish Parliament, and a former Minister of the Interior (2011-2015). For her endorsement of God’s Word regarding sexual matters (gender and marriage) she was detained and questioned by the police, the very entity that she was charged to lead just a few years prior. Throughout 13 hours of interrogation, the police treated her as an enemy of the state for her views on sexuality, for *God’s* views on sexuality. She has been charged with a crime and tried for her offense. The prosecutor openly challenged this Christian woman’s right to believe the testimony of Scripture (that sounds demonic to me). In March of 2022, she was acquitted in a court of law, in Helsinki. But the prosecutor has appealed the case to a court with more authority. That trial begins this week. Apparently, they have no double jeopardy law in Finland.

Can you imagine the distress, the spiritual angst, the pain of heart that this woman has gone through? I have no doubt that she has turned her entire face, her entire soul to God in search of His will, in search of His blessing, in search of His aid. Is it possible that there have been times throughout this ordeal that she thought herself entirely alone, forgotten by God and adrift in a world that she does not recognize? A cold response from God to your great need; has that spiritual splinter ever lodged itself in your mind? A mother came begging. A Canaanite woman, the unlikeliest of believers, came begging the Lord Christ. Canaanites were idolatrous. Pagan worship, religious prostitution and child sacrifice – the Canaanites explored the darkest regions of godless behavior. And a daughter of Canaan came to Christ begging. “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon” (Matthew 15:22). Is there any pain like unto a mother whose child is suffering? This woman is distressed. She knows exactly where to go.

Her prayer is a theological song, an acclimation of Divine Truth. Jesus *is* the Son of David, the Promised Messianic King, the One who both sits on the throne of the universe and who will hang on His throne in Jerusalem. His reign is full of grace and He will extend His kingdom into the unlikeliest places. Faith is a bulldog. This woman’s faith does not let go. Her reaction to adversity is not common in our era. The culture around us teaches us to whine, teaches us to consider ourselves to be victims, teaches us to play the self-pity game. Has any of that ever served you well? Hope and humility; God is at work in this woman to bring about *precisely* what He wants. Is that true of you? Has adversity forged Christ-like character in you? To what do you aspire? Character-wise, what do you desire to be? We sing a hymn that has this as the first line: “Take my life and let it be Consecrated Lord, to Thee.” Do you willingly, joyfully, hopefully and expectantly put your whole life in God’s hands each day, knowing that it is He who forges character in your soul?

This woman's character, her very being is a canvas and Jesus is the Master Artist who paints the most extraordinary portrait of love and humility and fortitude and faith. She is a wonder; she is a sublime icon of beauty, a woman who lowers herself willingly in order to reach true heights. It starts with a cold non-response, or so it seems. Jesus knows the veracity of her prayer. He knows the plight of her daughter, caught in the dark web of Satan's oppression. St. John tells us: "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil" (1 John 3:8). Jesus is at work in this woman's heart, He is at work to vanquish Satan, and He is at this work – both of these things – simultaneously, perfectly. Matthew tells us: "But he did not answer her a word" (Matthew 15:23). Hearing that, what's our impulse? What reaction do we have to all this in our mind? Help her! Bless her, release her daughter, relieve her pain, cast out the darkness and shine the light of your mercy! That's what I think. But then I remember: "God's ways are not our ways" (Isaiah 55). Timing; how to achieve His purposes; variables on top of variables; God is in control of way more than we can possibly imagine.

The disciples pray for her. Good. It's not a great prayer. They just want to be free of her petitions, but it is a prayer. "Send her away, for she is crying out after us" (Matthew 13:23). Perhaps you've prayed this way yourself, a time or two. Jesus seems to affirm His inaction to His disciples: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 13:25). Her prayer is then distilled to its primal essence. Kneeling before Him, she simply said: "Lord, help me." I know that you have prayed that prayer.

Remember, this woman is in the *Scripture*. God is telling you something about you through this woman. There is something majestic in this woman that is also in you. Sinner that you are, you are an unlikely saint, but that is precisely what you are. How did that come to happen? By chance? I think not. The Potter tells the clay an unhappy word: "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs" (Matthew 13:26). Oh, my! Jesus knows what is in this woman because He put it there. His Word carries His virtue. His Word creates faith and faith is humility, faith is love, faith is hope, faith is trust, faith knows that God will deliver us. And then this woman sings. After a seemingly unhappy word from Jesus, this woman sings. Faith sings; even when it is greatly distressed, faith sings. "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table" (Matthew 13:27).

I would suggest to you that the woman in Finland knows the Canaanite woman very well. They are kinsmen, bondwomen in service to the Almighty, sisters in faith, fellow parishioners of Christ the King. Scraps they say; we'll take whatever falls from the Master's table. The world and its vanity teaches you to adopt the opposite of this faith. Pride will not let you sing the song of grace in adversity, the song of forgiveness, the song of salvation. Satan is pride; hell is self-pity; victimhood is being curved in on yourself. The church is none of those things. We have been redeemed by the King (for everyone, for those who remain in darkness and those who have been brought into the Light). The King took up the form of a servant. For you! This King humbled Himself and was obedient unto death. Picture that death. Inundated with all the sin of man – hate and murder and deviancy of every sort; that sin, mine and yours, fully enveloped the Holy Son of God. To redeem you, that is what the King endured. Nails in His hands and feet, driven into His flesh by those who were created in His image. He allowed it; for you, for every

person you know. Love for you led Him to struggle for breath, struggle against pain and grief and shame. And life left His body.

Here's a Bible verse for you to commit to memory this week. "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" (Romans 8:32).

Do you know what that means? Jesus was not holding out on the Canaanite woman. Jesus is not holding out on you – ever! He's given you the very best, God has. Why would your heavenly Father withhold any other good thing if He has already given you His Son? Everything in this life is structured for your good. Believe it. All of God's promises are "yes" in Christ (2 Corinthians 2:20). Eternal life? Yes! Death is vanquished? Yes! Heaven is our home? Yes! We are forgiven? Yes! God's love will always be with me? Yes! I am holy? Yes! "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.' And her daughter was healed instantly" (Matthew 13:28). That was His plan all along. Now you are brought to His table. This meal is His plan. The richest banquet known to man is here, on this altar. Redlands is an unlikely place for the King of the universe to invade with His grace and His power but here is precisely where He has promised to be – where His Word is preached and His sacraments are administered. Life came back into His body. Jesus Christ is the risen King and life is what He gives.