

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

August 16, 2026

Text: Matthew 15:21-28 (Gospel Reading)

Other Texts: Isaiah 56:1, 6-8 (Old Testament); Romans 11:1-2a, 13-15, 28-32 (Epistle)

“A Model of Faith”

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen!

In today’s Introit¹ we cried out to God, “be not deaf to me,”² and again, “hear the voice of my pleas for mercy, when I cry to you for help.”³ But then we hear today’s Gospel where a woman pleads with Jesus to free her daughter from the horrors of demon-possession, and we witness Him seemingly being deaf to her, ignoring her, even calling her a dog, and we can’t help but question if He really hears our prayers or cares about us. So let us consider this text.

Jesus just had a major confrontation with some Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem concerning God’s law, traditions, and what truly defiles a person (what comes from the heart).⁴ It is possible that they were an official investigation but, at a minimum, they were a prestigious group in the eyes of the people. As this increasing opposition would likely hinder Jesus’ ministry, He and His disciples leave Galilee for the region of Tyre and Sidon (today’s Lebanon).

Now what is special about this area is revealed by the other main character in the events, the *Canaanite* woman. She is a descendent of Noah’s grandson Canaan, through his son Ham. More importantly, this also means that she was a descendent of the people whom God had commanded ancient Israel to drive out due to their idolatry, which included child sacrifice and religious sexual immorality.⁵ However, after the death of Joshua, Israel failed to remain faithful to the Lord, and part of that faithlessness was seen in their failure to completely expel these people as commanded. People who regularly seduced Israel into their idolatrous ways.

So consider, this woman is not just a Gentile, that is, a person not descended from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but more, she is a descendent of those ancient, idolatrous, and wicked people who had come under God’s judgment. The surprise then is not that this woman’s daughter was oppressed by a demon, that is almost expected. The surprise is that *she comes to Jesus*. For she knew how much the Jews hated her people. She knew that they thought of Gentiles in general as stones, yes, dogs, and that she, as a Canaanite, was the worst of the bunch in Jewish opinion. Truly she would be the least likely person to elicit mercy from a Jew, especially a religious teacher. And yet, despite all this, *she still comes to Jesus*, a Jewish rabbi, for help.

No doubt the news of Jesus had traveled to her region from Galilee through traders, travelers, and the like. She had heard that He was a mighty miracle worker, healing people and casting out demons, her current and urgent need. Yet, when she comes to Jesus, she doesn’t plead her case to

¹ The appointed Introit for this Sunday is Psalm 28:1-2, 6-7; with the antiphon being v. 8.

² Psalm 28:1. All quotes are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

³ Psalm 28:2.

⁴ Matthew 15:1ff.

⁵ This command is given in Numbers 33:51-56.

Him as if He's some sort of priest or sorcerer for hire, which would be a standard Canaanite approach. Quite the opposite, she comes pleading to Him yes, but using these words, "Have mercy on me Lord, Son of David."⁶ And what words they are!

They indicate that she considers Jesus as not merely a Jewish rabbi, but as the promised Jewish Messiah. The fact that she uses these terms from her heart and not just to get what she wants is proven in what follows. For she keeps calling Him *Lord*, the Greek word that translates God's name, Yahweh, in the Old Testament. Even more, while translated as she "knelt before him,"⁷ the word more accurately means to prostrate oneself *in worship*. Just consider the irony here: while most of the Jews were unwilling to give Jesus this title, to recognize Him as their Messiah, this *Canaanite woman worships* Him as the promised Son of David, *the Lord*.

Yet it is that irony that makes this text even more difficult. After all, if she was just trying to flatter Jesus, use the right words to get Him to do what she wanted, then we would have a lot less trouble with the way He treats her. But no! She is an actual *believer* pleading with Him, and yet He seemingly turns a deaf ear to her in her time of urgent need, when her request was for her precious child to be freed from Satan's power. She saw with her own eyes Jesus simply turn away from her. She "heard" His absolute silence towards her. Yet she continued on pleading, not stopping for a moment.

At this point, even the disciples get involved, encouraging Jesus to give her what she's asking for. After all, Jesus came here to avoid crowds and problems, but her constant crying out to Him was going to make new ones. Thus, while perhaps not for the best of reasons, even they want Jesus help her. But then Jesus responds, not to the woman, but to them, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."⁸

Finally, *some* explanation is given for Jesus' seeming heartless inactivity. Jesus is "the son of David, the son of Abraham,"⁹ as Matthew made clear in the first chapter of His Gospel. While His mission would benefit all of mankind, the Jews were given priority in time because of God's choice of Abraham. Therefore Jesus' mission had to take priority over all things, and that mission was to be *Israel's Messiah*. He would not, could not, jeopardize that mission by becoming a wandering miracle worker in the lands of the Gentiles.

Yet, this woman won't give up. She worships Him, begging *her* Lord for help. But in response she receives that harshest of statements, "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."¹⁰ I don't care how much of a dog lover you might be, being called a dog is not a complement. And it was far worse in Jesus' day when said by a Jew, for, as I said before, that's what the Jews called the Gentiles. Just consider these words from the book of Revelation to get a better understanding, "Outside [of New Jerusalem] are *the dogs* and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood."¹¹ Consider how complementary the word "dog" is, when leading such a list!

⁶ Matthew 15:22.

⁷ Matthew 15:25.

⁸ Matthew 15:24.

⁹ Matthew 1:1.

¹⁰ Matthew 15:26.

¹¹ Revelation 22:15, *emphasis mine*.

These words would have no doubt caused us to rise in anger, our pride bruised and bloodied, or would have had us crawl away in despair, utterly defeated. But not this woman! “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” Note, she doesn’t argue with Jesus about Him calling her a dog. On the contrary, she *agrees*. She is saying to Him, “Yes, Lord, I am a Gentile, a Canaanite, a people who are dogs due to our sin and idolatry. I do not claim to be a child, a Jew. Just let me be *Your* dog, Lord, and I will receive the crumbs that fall from Your table, and be satisfied for those crumbs are plenty for me.”

No wonder Jesus replies, “O woman, great is your faith!”¹² This is Jesus’ declaration and we can only agree in amazement at her. First, she approached Jesus in abject humility, claiming nothing, absolutely no reason that He should help her except one, because *He is merciful to those in need*. Second, even in the midst of her suffering, the horror of her daughter’s situation, she witnessed her merciful Lord being silent to her, *yet* she persevered in her prayers. Third, she was willing to receive mere crumbs, trusting that they would be enough for her in her trial.

This Canaanite woman, this dog, is from a people that are the iconic picture of unbelievers and God’s enemies, yet she is a fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy, “And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants.”¹³ For she is one of them, a foreigner joined to the Lord by faith whose sacrifices and prayers are well-pleasing to Him.¹⁴ She who was willing to settle for crumbs that fall from the Master’s table while here on earth, will sit *at* the table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, eating the fullness of the feast with them, for she is *a child of God*, through faith in Christ Jesus.¹⁵

We can learn a lot from this woman of mighty faith. We learn to humble ourselves before the Lord. Don’t bargain with Him, pretending He *owes* you anything. For even our works, which He does promise to graciously reward, are both worked in us by His Holy Spirit and still need the contaminant of sin that clings to them forgiven. Let us confess what the truth the Word declares, that our sins make us dogs who should be excluded from the kingdom. In humble repentance, we beg for God’s mercy. But even as you plead for His undeserved mercy, don’t give up or despair, but persevere in prayer, confident that His mercy *must* come.

For truly, this Jesus in whose name we pray is the very One who gave up His life on the cross to pay for our sins, all those that would exclude us from God’s kingdom as dogs. Even now *He pleads* for you and me, bringing our prayers before the Father’s throne of grace and mercy by His blood. And if He seems deaf to us, silent to our cries, we know that it is not ignoring us, turning His back on us, but is discipline, pushing us to cling to Him and His promises all the more firmly, thereby testing our faith to refine, purify, and strengthen it that it would persevere until faith is no longer needed as eyes behold Him!

May God increase our faith to be like that of the Canaanite woman. Amen!

¹² Matthew 28:28.

¹³ Isaiah 56:6a.

¹⁴ See Isaiah 56:6-7.

¹⁵ See Matthew 8:11; Romans 4:16-17.