

3.5.2023 Lent 2 (Matthew 15:21-28)

Some of the language used in our 1928 Book of Common Prayer is not pleasing to the modern ear. Most people today don't welcome the thought of a confession in which we "acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness," or an Exhortation to "miserable sinners, who lay in darkness and the shadow of death," or a twice-daily prayer through the season of Lent in which we find ourselves "worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness." In the past we've discussed some of these difficult phrases in order that we may understand them more completely and pray them sincerely, and this morning our Gospel reading provides us with another opportunity to talk about a prayer that many people in our day find challenging.

The Prayer of Humble Access begins with these familiar words: "We do not presume to come to this thy Table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table. But thou art the same Lord, whose property is always to have mercy..." The Prayer of Humble Access is our prayer for worthy reception of Holy Communion, one that we pray fervently just before approaching the Lord's Table. However, many people, even church leaders, who read these words disagree with the strong, penitential nature of this prayer. The words "we are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table" don't line up well with the type of modern theology that seeks only to affirm the inner goodness of humanity, and leaves no room for the brokenness which is at the very heart of our fallen human condition. Therefore, in more recent Anglican and Episcopal liturgies, this prayer is either optional (the rubric states "the following prayer may be said" 1979 BCP), edited (with the added phrase "Apart from your grace" we are not worthy... 2019 ACNA BCP), or omitted entirely (1979 BCP Rite II).

Revision is one way of dealing with this historic prayer, but a less extreme and far more profitable way is found in seeking a greater understanding of the truth these words intend to communicate, and their biblical basis. When we take this approach, what we find in the Prayer of Humble Access is the message of the Gospel (We have no righteousness in which to trust... We are not worthy, but God's nature and property is always to have mercy). In this

prayer we find the message of the Gospel, and at the end of prayer the promise of intimate communion with our Lord.

One of the places this prayer draws its imagery from is found in the Gospel text we read this morning about a Canaanite woman who approached Jesus and asked for His help because her daughter was possessed by a demon. In this passage, Jesus and His disciples had departed “*into the coasts of Tyre and Sidon*” (Matthew 15:21). Our Lord withdrew to this remote area after a bitter debate with the Pharisees, perhaps seeking rest, some time alone with the Twelve, and with His Father in prayer. Scripture tells us that this time of peace and rest was interrupted by a Canaanite woman, a Gentile who “*came out of the same coasts, and cried unto Him, saying, Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou Son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a devil*” (15:22).

Notice the way this Gentile woman acknowledged the truth of who Jesus is when she cried out to Him for mercy. She referred to Him as her Lord, and used the messianic title the Son of David to humbly reach out to the Promised Messiah who Israel pridefully rejected. This Canaanite woman by faith believed that He is the Lord all. The Lord of all things visible, and all things invisible. Even the unseen demon that was oppressing her daughter was under His power and dominion. Her humble plea, which asked only for mercy, also acknowledged the truth about who she is: a Canaanite, an enemy of the people of God (Deuteronomy 7:1-2), someone who is completely unworthy and undeserving of receiving anything from the God of Israel.

The Canaanite woman asked only for mercy, she cried out to Jesus with all the pain of a mother whose daughter was “*grievously vexed with a devil*” (15:22), who was suffering in uncontrollable agony, but the passage reveals that Jesus “*answered her not a word*” and His disciples asked Him to “*send her away*” (15:23) because her crying was annoying them. When Jesus finally spoke, His words were not the comforting response we’ve come to expect, but instead “*He answered and said, I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel*” (15:24).

In our day, we hear those words as complete rejection, but in that culture for Jesus, a Jewish Rabbi, to even speak to a Gentile woman could be viewed as

an invitation for her to continue this dialogue, and that's exactly what she did. The text tells us that she came, and she worshipped Him. She fell down in front of Jesus and said, "*Lord, help me. But He answered and said, It is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it to dogs*" (15:25-26), and once again, where we see only insult and rejection, the Canaanite woman saw an opportunity, and she replied, "*Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table*" (15:27).

This humble response continues to reveal the truth about how clearly this woman understood that she approached our Lord in complete poverty. She came before Him with empty hands. She came as an unworthy, undeserving, enemy of God and His people, and therefore her argument was not based on her own merit, but only on His mercy. This is a picture of humility and faith, to which Jesus responds, "*O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt. And her daughter was made whole from that very hour*" (15:28).

The Canaanite woman cried out to Jesus for mercy, and in her words we recognize a prayer of humble access. It was her persistent, faithful, humble cry that gained her access to God and to the healing only He can provide, and while it doesn't feel good to our prideful flesh to say it aloud, what was true for her is true for all of us. We also approach our Lord and God in complete poverty. We come before Jesus with empty hands, not "trusting in our own righteousness" (in our own merit), but only in His "manifold and great mercies." We are not worthy "so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table," but God is so rich in mercy that He feeds us not with crumbs, but with His own Body and Blood.

Jesus declared: "*I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh*" (John 6:51 ESV). "*He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood dwells in Me, and I in him*" (6:56). This promise of intimate communion with our Lord is taken from Scripture and placed at the end of the Prayer of Humble Access, where we cry out to God, "Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of thy dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink His blood, that our sinful bodies may be made clean by His body, and our souls washed through His most precious blood, and that we may evermore dwell in Him, and He in us."

Through the sacrifice of His only-begotten Son, God has shown us the fact that we are not worthy does not mean that we are worthless. He has perfectly and painfully demonstrated our infinite value to Him, and through the Sacrament of Holy Communion the depth of God's desire for intimate fellowship with His people is continually revealed to us as we receive Him, and are "made one body with Him."

The healing of the Canaanite woman's daughter, and the historic Prayer of Humble Access that flows directly from this and other passages of Scripture, reveal the truth that when we approach Christ in humility, we gain access to God. When we stop "trusting in our own righteousness," we then position ourselves to rely only on His "manifold and great mercies." When we acknowledge the fact that "we are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table," we then depend entirely on the Lamb who is worthy, who feeds us not with crumbs, but with the Bread of Heaven. By the grace and mercy of Almighty God, ever may our souls be fed, with this true and living Bread.