

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
August 16, 2026 – The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
Genesis 45:1-15; Matthew 15:21-28
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

“Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy.”

Our Old Testament lesson for today has moved us a good deal further along in the story of Joseph that we began to hear last week. Today's reading is part of the story of Joseph's life in Egypt, but we have passed over some of the incidents that resulted in Joseph's success in that foreign land. In the intervening chapters, which are an entertaining section of the book of Genesis, the nomadic traders who had bought Joseph from his brothers sell him to a wealthy Egyptian. Joseph is thrown in jail on a false accusation. While in jail he interprets some dreams for his fellow inmates, and his interpretations are proved true. One of the fellow inmates, a court official who has fallen out of favor with Pharaoh and then been restored, remembers Joseph's talent in dream interpretation when Pharaoh himself has a dream. It is the dream of seven fat cows who are then eaten by seven lean cows. Joseph interprets this to mean that there will be seven years of good harvests and then seven years of famine. He urges Pharaoh to store up extra food during the fat years, to carry the country through the lean years. Pharaoh agrees to this plan and appoints Joseph himself to carry it out. Thus, Joseph becomes a high official in Egypt and is in charge of food distribution during the famine, which had come just as Joseph had warned.

Our reading this morning picks up the story two years into the famine. Egypt is the only place where there is food. Joseph's father has sent his sons to Egypt to beg for food. They come before Joseph. They do not recognize him as their brother, but he recognizes them. Joseph lavishes mercy and kindness on his brothers. He weeps with joy at meeting them again, and he rejoices because he has the opportunity to save his father and all his family. Joseph sees the hand of God behind all that has happened, including his brothers' envious treachery in selling him to nomadic traders.

What a remarkable story of mercy! I can't help but think of Joseph's mercy as a reflection of God's mercy. His story brings to mind the Parable of the Prodigal Son. As soon as the father sees his wayward son returning home, he rejoices and gives him a lavish welcome home party, for the son he thought was dead was alive and with his father once more, his sins against his father forgiven.

In our reading from Matthew, we heard one of many accounts of Christ's mercy found in the four Gospels, the healing of the Canaanite woman's daughter. The story begins with the woman shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” Have mercy on me, Lord!

This woman is a Gentile, not a Jew. Not only is she a Gentile, she is a Canaanite. Of all the Gentiles, among Jews the greatest animosity would be reserved for the Canaanites. These were the people who had to be driven out of the land so that Israel could take possession. They were the “enemy” in Israel's conquest of what they regarded as the land promised to them by God.

This woman is shouting. The word in Greek may be translated “shrieking,” as a woman in labor cries out in pain. Jesus’ disciples ask him to send her away. She is a pest, a loud pest. Jesus’ first response is to say that he has been sent to help only the Jews. The woman persists, and on her knees and with reverence for Jesus the healer she begs, “Lord, help me.” Jesus’ response is an insult. “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Dogs were not considered “man’s best friend” in Jesus’ day. Dogs were not beloved pets. They were half-wild animals, scavengers. When the woman says to Jesus, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table,” we mustn’t picture a contemporary image of a child at the dinner table who slips a food treat from her plate to her puppy while her parents smile. Dogs around the table were a nuisance.

The woman’s reply challenges Jesus. “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” Jesus seems to see that his first response was wrong, too limited. Yes, he had been sent to the Jews, but not only to the Jews. God’s mercy – as revealed in Jesus’ power to heal – was for Gentiles as well. There are people who are distressed by this passage because they cannot accept that Jesus was ever “wrong.” But Jesus was human. Scripture tells us that he learned as he matured. His understanding of life and of God deepened over time. The significant point is the direction of his growth – always to greater love and mercy. So, Jesus replies to the Gentile mother, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” “And her daughter was healed instantly.”

Let’s look for a moment at this morning’s passages from the perspective of those seeking mercy. Joseph’s brothers approached him begging for food to keep themselves and their families alive. They did not approach Joseph with an air of entitlement. We might wonder what would have happened if the brothers had learned that Joseph was in charge in Egypt and then gone to him demanding that he provide for his family at home. It might not have gone so well for them!

The Canaanite woman doesn’t say to Jesus, “how dare you call me a dog!” She doesn’t approach Jesus as though her daughter deserves to be healed. Rather, with love for her daughter and respect for the man who was known to be a healer, she knelt before him and asked for his help.

We are all familiar with the custom of kneeling in church to confess our sins to God, though that is not the custom here. Kneeling with our bodies, we acknowledge that we don’t deserve God’s mercy; forgiveness isn’t our “right.” We are not in the position to demand God’s grace and gifts and blessings. We are supplicants, the creatures of our merciful God. We bend our knees to signify all this as we approach God in prayer. But scripture teaches us that what God desires is not so much a certain position of our bodies when we pray, but rather that we bend the knees of our hearts in humility and love.

Heart work is hard work. It is different for each of us, but it always moves us closer to the truth, even truth about ourselves that we would rather not see. We learn, though, when we are honest with ourselves and with God, that God is indeed merciful, beyond human expectation, beyond our deserving. God’s mercy is the foundation of our hope. When we cry “Lord, have mercy!” our cries will be heard, and the One who healed the Canaanite woman’s daughter will heal us, too. In his holy name. Amen.