

Reminiscere

25 February, Anno Domini 2024

St. Matthew 15:12-28

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

Dear Christians,

In this woman who throws herself at Jesus' feet seeking mercy for her afflicted daughter, we have one of the most beautiful pictures of true Christian faith in all of Scripture. It is unyielding even though it seems to suffer the most terrible blows from Christ. It has zero interest in social propriety. Faith listens and clings to only one thing - the promises of God in Christ Jesus. Anything contrary to that Gospel must submit. Faith knows nothing of God except what God Himself has said and done in Jesus. And Jesus shows that that is exactly the way He wants it. He wants, as Luther says, for you to trap Him in His own words and demand that He be faithful to His promises of mercy and forgiveness.

Oh that God would grant to us all such faith! But do you see what such a prayer means? True faith is not born of peace and ease just as muscles do not grow strong by laying around on the couch. True faith is born in the fires of tribulation and hardship. All earthly things to which your heart clings, everything about yourself that you seek to take pride in, everything you think you need to be or have or do must be shown for what they are - vain and useless because they are not God. Faith can have only one foundation upon which it stands - the promises of God in Christ Jesus. All other ground is sinking sand, a death trap. You must die to yourself and this world and count every success, every strength, every worldly gain, every pleasure as loss. Sight, experience, feelings, reason must all give way to what you have heard about this man, Jesus Christ, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary, who drove out demons, who healed all diseases and afflictions, who raised the dead. Only in this Jesus, in whom the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily, can you be sure of God's love and mercy for you.

But how often we go looking somewhere, anywhere else for security and for the assurance of God's love when we have heard with our own ears the preaching of Christ's ambassadors

whom He Himself has called and ordained, when Christ has placed into our mouths the very Body and Blood which He offered in payment for our sins! And still, our hearts aren't satisfied. We aren't content to live in the confidence that God's Word is true and that He will fulfill all His promises even when it seems like the whole world, hell, and even heaven itself seem to be set against us. We clamor for more, for something else, some other proof. We think that if our situation were to improve, then we could be sure of God's mercy. We look for a better us, a healthier, more stable, smarter, stronger, more talented, more organized, more successful, more independent, less sick, less tired, less persecuted, less impoverished us to serve as evidence that God is pleased with us.

And, consequently, we demand the same from others. We withhold our love and mercy until they meet our self-prescribed standards and so condemn ourselves to the same treatment from God. And in the absence of these things, when our bodies, our minds, and our lives are filled with weakness and sin we despair of God's love. We measure God by our own strengths and weaknesses rather than His strength - His Holy Word which declares the objective reality of Christ's cross and

empty tomb, which institutes and prescribes the washing of Holy Baptism, and the life-giving food of the Lord's Supper.

Repent. If you count yourself as strong, upright, or even a good Christian then beware because when Christ comes against you like He did against Jacob and the Canaanite woman, you will be crushed because you will have built your house on sinking sand. In the hour of testing, when God veils His love and His mercy and allows you to taste even a morsel of the bitterness of judgment, when He sweeps away all your strength and your idols, if you were depending on your own goodness and righteousness, you will know only despair because all that you trusted in will be consumed as stubble in the fire.

The judgments of God's holy Law are true and you will either confess that now or standing before God's throne on the Last Day. Your sins are, indeed, many. There is nothing good in you, that is, in your flesh. It is evil through and through and no matter how much window dressing you try to do to cover it up, no matter how many outwardly beautiful works you try to use as red herrings, no matter what kind of image you try to project for the rest of the world, God will not be fooled. He sees how you have filled your life with all sorts of false gods from whom you

expect peace, joy, care, and pleasure. He sees how you have despised prayer and left the study of His holy and life-giving Word out of your own daily life and that of your family. The eye of the Lord beholds the callous and merciless way in which you treat your spouse, your children, and your neighbor. He knows your arrogance, your anger, your fear, your covetousness, your apathy, and your lovelessness.

And to all of that, driven by the Holy Spirit, only true faith is able to answer with a resounding “Amen. It’s true. I am a dog. I have no right to claim a place among God’s children. God has every right to reject and punish me. I deserve God to turn away from me. I deserve every ounce of God’s wrath and displeasure, every affliction and torment.” But true faith is not afraid to confess this because true faith, the faith gifted to you by God the Father in Holy Baptism, the faith that is strengthened by the Holy Communion, isn’t faith in yourself. It is faith in Christ - HIS holiness, HIS strength, HIS goodness. It is built on the unchanging word of God that He has declared you righteous for Jesus’ sake. Even when God Himself seems turned against you and seems to be working to destroy you, the only thing faith will believe about God is His love and mercy and forgiveness. True Christian faith, faith that is pleasing to God

hears the thunderings of the Law but knows only Jesus who has fulfilled the Law and yet suffered its terrible condemnation in our place. Against this wall, such condemnations will break and be brought to nothing. This faith is the highest and truest Christian worship. True Christian faith demands our weakness and brokenness because otherwise we have no need of a Savior. If we are not sick and in need, if we believe that God is a liar when He says that every inclination of our hearts is evil from our youth even from the time we were conceived in our mother's womb, then we will find no comfort in Jesus and no help from Him.

Are you afraid that God has turned away from you? Are you filled with hopelessness or despair? Are you unsure that God could love you? Are you terrified by the darkness and hardness that you see in your own heart? Is the devil harassing you with the pain you've suffered and the pain you've caused? Then hear this eternal and unchanging word and promise of Almighty God: Jesus Christ, God's only-begotten and beloved Son, has born in His spotless flesh all of your sins, all of your frailties, all of your diseases, and all of your pain. He humbled Himself to the point of death on the cross because the last thing God wants is for you to perish eternally. His most fervent desire is

your salvation and He has accomplished it by His own death and resurrection, completely and forever, and He has made it yours in the waters of the font. God wants you to know and believe it because it is absolutely true. No devil, no sin, no death can undo what Jesus has done for you. He has declared you forgiven, free, justified, redeemed. He has set you free from the vain and damning notion that there is anything that you can and must contribute to your salvation. There is only one thing God wants you to hear and believe - "Take, eat; this is **My Body** given **for you**. Take, drink; this is **My Blood** shed **for you** for the forgiveness of your sins."

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus our Lord.