

Sermon: Have Mercy on me, Lord!

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, August 16, 2026)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

In the 1991 Pulitzer Prize winning play *Angels in America*, written by Anthony R. Kushner, the main character (a gay character with AIDS) Walter Prior recounts the arrival of his ancestor, a ship captain who made his living by bringing whale oil to the Old World and immigrants to the New World. During a winter tempest off the coast of Nova Scotia, the ship sank and along went its captain. But the crew managed to take 70 survivors, mostly women and children, to a open rowboat.

When the weather became rougher, and the boat was undeniably overcrowded, the crew decided, in an effort to lighten the load and get the balance 'right', they picked up some survivors and tossed them overboard. However, the boat was also leaking, it was an unmitigated disaster, so the crew continued to toss people overboard, one after another, women and children mostly, until the rowboat somehow arrived safely in Halifax, with only nine people left on board.

Listen to this quote from the play: "I think about that story a lot now," says Prior from his sickbed. "People in a boat, waiting, terrified, while implacable, unsmiling men, irresistibly strong, seize . . . maybe the person next to you, maybe you, and with no warning at all, with time only for a quick intake of air you are pitched into freezing, turbulent water and salt and darkness to drown."

Yes, its only a play, however horrible it may be, and probably not quite suitable as material for a laze, hazy, summer sermon in a joint worship service. Nevertheless, friends, sisters and brothers in Christ, with this scene in that play in mind, I would like to invite you to consider this uncomfortable question: **How do the blessed feel when they think of the damned?**

The question was originally posed by Cynthia A. Jarvis, a fellow Presbyterian pastor from Chestnut Hill in Philadelphia, in an article published in *The Christian Century* magazine, back in 2002. The context of posing such a pointed question is not without its theological basis. Throughout the history of Christianity, some have insisted and maintained that salvation is essentially an exclusive affair.

John Calvin, the principal theologian of the Protestant Reformation, wrote in his seminal book *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book III, Chapter 21, Section 1: "We shall never be clearly persuaded, as we ought to be, that our

salvation flows from the wellspring of God's free mercy until we come to know his eternal election, which illumines God's grace by this contrast: that God does not indiscriminately adopt all into the hope of salvation but gives to some what God denies to others."

Did you catch that? The hope of salvation given to some but denied to others?

At the heart of this difficult doctrine, the doctrine of predestination, or as some would call it 'double predestination', is the proclamation that our lives and our death are all in God's merciful hand, not by our own merit but by God's gracious disposition toward us. We cannot, need not spend our lives doing good works in order to be saved, but only in faithful and thankful response to be loved.

Still, there is this little yet menacing caveat, as Jarvis rightly points out, that thrust the Canaanite woman upon Jesus' mercy, (that is) If we are counted among the saved.

The story as recorded in Matthew 15, our Gospel reading today, starts with the Canaanite woman shouting, at a distance, at a traveling preacher and healer, aka Jesus, saying, "*Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.*" (v.22)

In the English language, mercy can understood as compassionate treatment of those in distress, or as restraint shown to an offender who is subject to the power of another. In Hebrew, the closest equivalent to the word mercy is *hesed*, a word with multiple meanings including love, lovingkindness, goodness, fidelity, and of course mercy. Mercy is also often connected to compassion. The Greek word from which compassion is derived means literally 'from the bowels', denoting the visceral reaction one feels in their guts while witnessing the sufferings of others.

In the Bible, mercy is one of God's most evocative attributes, and merciful acts are among the actions of God by which biblical writers most gleefully rejoice. We find this description, this theological formula of God in approximately a dozen or so times in the Bible—that God is 'merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness'.

Whether compassion, or pity or even divine favour, this Canaanite woman called out to Jesus, "Have mercy on me, Lord", not for herself, but for her daughter who was tormented by a demon. But how dare an unclean woman even thought of petitioning Jesus, a well regarded Jewish Rabbi! Not only was she a Gentile, a woman, and her daughter was tormented by a demon! That's triply unclean, by my count!

I am speaking of course from the perspective of the Jewish culture at that time. From that perspective, we could understand the silent treatment Jesus gave, for he 'did not answered a word'. Notice, it was the disciples who became

impatient, were annoyed, irritate enough, that they came to Jesus and urged him, “*Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us.*” (v.23) Oh, the irony of a foreigner addressing Jesus as ‘Lord’, contrasting to the disciples ordering Jesus as if he was their servant.

To that cruel demand, Jesus added a different layer of cruelty, “*I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.*” (v.25) Evidently, Jesus understood the demand of the Torah, he saw his ministry as consistent with the prophetic ministries of Israel’s past. He was sent by God to save the lost children of God, namely the covenantal Israel. Until the remnant of Israel is fully redeemed, he had no time to waste on the Gentiles, much less on a woman who did not know her place, who was definitely not counted among the saved (toss her overboard, must get the balance right)!

Disciples’ cruelty may be cultural, the cruelty Jesus demonstrated in that statement was theological. Nevertheless, the woman was persistent, putting into deed her previous word of proclaiming Jesus as ‘Lord’, she came and knelt down before him, pleading a second time, “Lord, help me!” she cried.

What follows, in my opinion is one of the most offensive, and perhaps most difficult passage to digest. In verse 26, Jesus replied, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” Throw it to the dogs! Let us pause here for a minute, and let those words sink in a little bit more. Children refers to the Israelites who enjoy an unique and covenantal relationship with God. Bread is salvation that which reconciles people to God, thus ushering an everlasting Shalom. Dogs are of course referring to the Gentiles, who are underserving of God’s mercy and compassion. Even if they were to be included in God’s economy of grace, they would only occupy a very tiny fraction, not worthy of wasting the Messiah’s precious time.

That statement was highly offensive, truly insulting, to both the modern and ancient sensibility. To that particular Gentile dog, that Canaanite woman.....’Shoo! Go away!’ Anyone, facing such an injustice, such a power imbalance, insulted in such a way, would’ve stormed out in protest—teeth clenching, tears streaming, fist ponding—but not this Canaanite woman. She calmly, humbly and wisely, retorted ‘Yes, but...’ Agreeing with Jesus, but nevertheless, inviting him to reconsider the breadth and depth of God’s love for the world, and for all humanity. In verse 27, “*Yes it is, Lord,*” she said. “*Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.*”

There is a subtle, playful, play on the word ‘dogs’ employed by this persistent Canaanite woman that is often lost in the English translation. The word used by Jesus, or *kynariois* in Greek, denotes wild strays, but the word used by the Canaanite woman, or *kynaria* in Greek, is best understood as household pets. In effect, she is placing herself firmly in the household of God, and asking

for a piece, even just a tiny scrap of salvation: Lord, I am not disputing your understanding of God's plan for salvation, I am not questioning your principled statement of faith concerning your call, But isn't the grace and the blessing of God so vast and inexplicable that even the largest cup would bound to overflow?

To that response, in verse 28, then Jesus said to her, "*Woman, great is your faith! Your request is granted.*" And her daughter was healed at that moment. Her prayer was answered positively and instantly.

Coming back to the question I posed earlier: How do the blessed feel when they think of the damned? Allow me to rephrase that a bit: How do you feel when you think of those outside of salvation?

In a rapidly shrinking Christendom, and with the Western Church, (and here I use the that description intentionally, for the picture of Global Church is very much different than what we are seeing here in Canada)...

With the Western Church which appears to be more and more like a leaking and sinking rowboat, are we to be like those implacable, unsmiling sailors tossing people overboard for their own selfish needs, guided by their limited understanding?

Or will we be more like Jesus, willing to be moved, to be changed, willing to go with our guts and be moved to mercy, in all our dealings with those inside the church and those outside of it.

Will we take serious the teaching of prophets, here I have Hosea in mind who insisted that "*God desires mercy, not sacrifice*" (Hosea 6:6), that God cares more about true love, kindness, forgiveness and compassion than about empty religious doctrines and practices?

Will we take serious the teaching of Jesus, here I have the Beatitudes in mind, particularly "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy" (Matthew 5:7)?

Might we perhaps consider ourselves no different than that Canaanite woman, and take our prayers, our petitions to Jesus on bended knees? Not thinking we got it all figured out, but realizing we are still very much in need, in need of mercy.

Just as the Church has repeatedly chanted and sang, throughout in our liturgy, our prayers, and our thoughts ever since the very beginning: *Kurios eleēson*, Lord, have mercy! Have mercy on me, on us, on all of us, whether blessed or damned.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**