

At Home Worship
August 16, 2020
First Presbyterian Church-Sweetwater

Find a Sacred Space

Sit comfortably, perhaps with something warm to drink, where you can look out on the beauty Of God's creation today. Read aloud or quietly to yourself, or as a family share the various parts of the service.

Greeting - The Lord be with you. **And also with you.**

Call to Worship and Prayer of Praise

Many barriers come between God and his people, limiting his ability to give wholeness.

It seemed the Canaanite woman would be rejected; but her faith overcame her barriers, and brought healing to her daughter.

The gift of faith is available to everyone, and breaks through any barrier to God's grace.

**May God give us faith to overcome any obstacle which seems to withhold his love from us.
Blessed be the name of the Lord!**

Precious Savior, we know that your mercy is for everyone. Sometimes we act as if it is conditional, as if it is based upon our performance. We often try to label people as more or less deserving of your mercy. This becomes a no-win situation. It is not possible for anyone to stand before you and lay claim to special consideration. Our hands are empty. Faith in Jesus Christ is the only way to gain access to your mercy. Through Christ, you have clearly shown us that you love us just the way we are. When we truly believe this, we will change into people with a purpose. This news is too important to hold inside! It must be shared. Amen.

Sing, Listen, or Read Hymn "Shine Jesus, Shine" #2173

Refrain:

Shine, Jesus shine, fill this land with the Father's glory, blaze, spirit blaze, set our hearts on fire; flow, river flow, flood the nations with grace and mercy, send forth your word, Lord and let there be light.

1. Lord, the light of your love is shining in the midst of the darkness shining; Jesus, Light of the World, shine upon us, set us free by the truth You now bring us, Shine on me, shine on me.

Refrain:

Shine, Jesus shine, fill this land with the Father's glory, blaze, spirit blaze, set our hearts on fire; flow, river flow, flood the nations with grace and mercy, send forth your word, Lord and let there be light.

2. Lord I come to your awesome presence, from the shadows into your radiance. by the blood I may enter your brightness, search me, try me, consume all my darkness. Shine on me, shine on me.

Refrain:

Shine, Jesus shine, fill this land with the Father's glory, blaze, spirit blaze, set our hearts on fire; flow, river flow, flood the nations with grace and mercy, send forth your word, Lord and let there be light.

3. As we gaze on your kingly brightness, so our faces display your likeness; ever changing from glory to glory, mirrored here may our lives tell your story. Shine on me, shine on me.

Refrain:

Shine, Jesus shine, fill this land with the Father's glory, blaze, spirit blaze, set our hearts on fire; flow, river flow, flood the nations with grace and mercy, send forth your word, Lord and let there be light.

A Time of Confession and Assurance

Lord Jesus, we see that your actions and your words are one. You told your disciples that it is not the standards of our society which determine what is right, but the way in which we treat each other as children of God. You demonstrated how ugly prejudice can be, then you shocked your disciples by reaching out to the stranger. Challenge us today to welcome all your people into our church family. Inspire us to live what we proclaim.

Silent Confession Amen.

Psalm 103:8-12

For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. The good news in Christ is that when we face ourselves and God with the awareness of our need, we are given grace to grow, and courage to continue the journey. Friends, believe the good news of the gospel. In Jesus Christ we are forgiven.

Sing, Listen, or Read Hymn “Grace Greater Than Our Sin” VSS 1,2,4

1. Marvelous grace of our loving Lord, grace that exceeds our sin and our guilt! Yonder on Calvary's mount outpoured, there where the blood of the Lamb was spilt.

Refrain:

Grace, grace, God's grace, grace that will pardon and cleanse within; grace, grace, God's grace, grace that is greater than all our sin!

2. Sin and despair, like the sea waves cold, threaten the soul with infinite loss; grace that is greater, yes, grace untold, points to the refuge, the mighty cross.

Refrain:

Grace, grace, God's grace, grace that will pardon and cleanse within; grace, grace, God's grace, grace that is greater than all our sin!

4. Marvelous, infinite, matchless grace, freely bestowed on all who believe! You that are longing to see his face, will you this moment his grace receive?

Refrain:

Grace, grace, God's grace, grace that will pardon and cleanse within; grace, grace, God's grace, grace that is greater than all our sin!

Desperate Times

Matthew 15: (10-20), 21-28

This week marks the point in the year when most of us have wrapped up our summer vacation

plans, and we're getting back to our normal routines of work. Normal routines do not seem so normal this year, vacations haven't been normal either. Some people might think we are living in desperate times.

Once you understand a little background for today's Bible passage, you may question if Jesus was on a vacation that was not normal. Our passage begins like this: "Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon . . ."

Let me stop there for just a moment. Tyre and Sidon were Gentile towns about 50 miles away from where Jesus had last been in Galilee. Why did Jesus travel 50 miles into Gentile territory? Did he have some urgent business there? Did he sign up for a vacation tour of Gentile territory? The answer to those questions is No. There is no explanation provided as to why Jesus went to Tyre and Sidon. But he did. Now, let's continue our story.

"A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, 'Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly.'" You don't imagine that Jesus came fifty miles from home just to minister to this distraught mother, do you? Who knows? After all, this is Jesus.

Nobody cared about people who are hurting like Jesus. It makes no difference their religion or where they live. It is interesting to note that, after his encounter with the Canaanite woman, Jesus turns around and heads back to his usual area of ministry around the Sea of Galilee. So, it would appear that the only obvious reason Jesus might have traveled to this challenging destination was to minister to this desperate woman.

And this was not just any woman—this was a Canaanite woman. In Jesus' day, no observant Jew would speak with a woman outside his own family—and particularly not a Canaanite. They were traditionally considered enemies of the Jewish people. And it's true that, at first, Jesus seems to spurn her cries for help. Matthew tells us that after she made this desperate request of him, "Jesus did not answer a word." That surely was not encouraging to this woman. His disciples were no help. They came to him and urged him, "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us." At this Jesus answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."

I am surprised this woman was not crushed at Jesus' response. However, she didn't give up. She came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said. And he replied with another crushing remark: "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs." Now it's time for Jesus to be surprised. "Yes it is, Lord," the Canaanite woman said. "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

Scholars puzzle over Christ's conversation with this woman. It seems so un-Christ-like. But I wonder if Jesus wasn't giving this woman a test—a test of her desire to have her daughter healed—but even more important—a test of her faith that he really could heal her daughter. I suggest the latter because of the way Jesus ends this unusual story. He commends this woman for her great faith!

There are only three people in the Bible who were specifically commended by Jesus for their great

faith: a Roman officer who pleaded with Jesus to heal his servant, a woman who had been hemorrhaging blood for twelve years and touched the border of Jesus' robe in hopes of receiving healing, and this Canaanite woman who came to Jesus begging him to heal her demon-possessed daughter. The funny thing is that none of these three people had the right according to the Jewish law to approach Jesus with a request for help. They were separated from him by a huge wall of cultural and religious norms.

We've already mentioned the Canaanite woman's lowly status. But the woman hemorrhaging blood was ritually unclean due to her bleeding and shouldn't have touched the border of Jesus' robe at all. As for the Roman officer, he was a representative of a Gentile government which oppressed the Jewish people. By the Law, none of these three people had the right to bring their desperation to Jesus. But Jesus didn't reject them or correct them. In fact, he commended each one of them for their great faith.

I don't know about you, but Jesus' definition of "great faith" looks different from mine. I usually equate great faith with courage or self-discipline or sacrifice. Superhero saints—not desperate people pushing their way into Jesus' presence.

Desperation is a scary state of being. Desperation can drive us to make unthinkable bad choices. Many of us know what it's like to feel desperate, just like the Roman officer and the bleeding woman and the mother with the demon-possessed child. The agony threatens to overwhelm us. We feel like we can't breathe.

There is a popular phrase. Desperate times call for desperate measures. I want to suggest to you that a more helpful phrase would be "Desperate times call for Jesus." That's the real truth of the matter.

In Australia in 2007, an episode of the television series *Mayday* was interrupted by a frightening technical glitch. For six minutes on that show, a haunting audio loop played in the background. It was the sound of a voice repeating over and over, "Jesus Christ, help us all, Lord. . . Jesus Christ, help us all, Lord . . . Jesus Christ, help us all, Lord." An investigation discovered that the audio loop was from a news program the previous year about insurgent soldiers firing on civilians in a foreign country. In such a setting such a prayer would certainly be appropriate. "Jesus Christ, help us all, Lord." However, the investigation did not reveal how an audio loop of that desperate prayer happened to interrupt a national broadcast for six minutes a year later.

This Bible passage about the Canaanite woman shows us that desperation doesn't disqualify you from having great faith. Neither does your gender or social status. All that's required is the willingness to bring your desperate need to Jesus.

It's interesting. This woman who wasn't from the Jewish faith addressed Jesus as Lord. The word she used refers to one who is Supreme or Master. How did she know? Even when Jesus' own disciples weren't sure of his claims, this foreigner recognized who he was. She knew that the power of life was in his hands. Somehow, she knew he was her only hope.

Anne Lamott, a New York Times bestselling author, has said that her prayer every morning is, “Help me, help me, help me.” Her nightly prayer is “Thank you, thank you, thank you.” In between those two prayers, she says, is an occasional “WOW” prayer when she is suddenly aware of God’s work in her daily life.

I think the Canaanite mother and Anne Lamott could understand each other’s prayer life. “Help me, help me, help me!”—that’s a legitimate prayer. Sometimes it is the only prayer we can manage. And notice that the Canaanite woman brought her desperation to Jesus, even when he initially responded with silence and then seemed to turn her away. Some people read this passage and think that Jesus was being insensitive to this mother’s pain. But remember, it may be that Jesus did come on foot to this faraway Gentile town 50 miles from home just to meet this one desperate woman in her need. Even more impressive, he came from the right hand of God to this lonely planet to help us all in our times of desperation. Desperate times call for Jesus.

In 2015, Kate Bowler was diagnosed with stage IV cancer in her abdomen. She was a divinity professor at Duke University, and mother to a one-year-old son. Kate and her husband were devastated by her diagnosis. In *Guideposts* magazine, Kate writes of how she always thought she had a deal with God—a quid pro quo, if you will. That’s a phrase that has been bandied about quite a bit this past year. It means “a favor or advantage granted or expected in return for something.” Kate secretly felt she had a quid pro quo with God. She grew up as a good Christian girl, working hard, keeping all the rules. She married a good Christian man, got a doctorate in religious studies, served in her church. Deep in her heart, Kate had thought that God might reward her for her faithfulness by giving her a manageable life. Dying young from a painful and invasive cancer didn’t fit into this deal she thought she had with God.

She writes: “I had been hoping for control. Work hard, stay right with God and life will work out. The key word is that little and. Do this and you get that. Action, result—guaranteed. That’s control. Ever since my diagnosis,” she writes, “I had been praying hard. But Jesus, I had to admit, never says that God offers us certainty. Jesus says God offers us love. Could I love God even knowing I could die in two months?”

That’s a tough question, isn’t it? “Jesus never says that God offers us certainty. Jesus says God offers us love.” Jesus is absolute proof that God loves us.

Jesus may have walked a hundred miles round trip to Tyre and Sidon to minister to this Canaanite woman. And Jesus walked in our shoes all the way to the cross for no other reason than that he loves us. He shared our weakness, our questions, our pain. Remember that the night before his arrest Jesus prayed so desperately that he sweated drops of blood.

Jesus understands what it is to be desperate. He didn’t come to wave a magic wand and take away all our troubles. But he did come to show us that we are not alone. His message and his ministry kept coming back to this one truth: There is a God, and God loves you.

Desperate times call for Jesus. What was the Canaanite mother’s first request of Jesus? “. . . have mercy on me.” She knew that mercy is an essential part of God’s character. And so even though

she knew she had no right to approach Jesus, she was counting on his mercy to meet her daughter's needs. And notice that even when Jesus was silent, even when he tried to turn her away, she knelt down at his feet. The Greek word used here indicates that she knelt down in worship before him. No matter whether he answered her cry for help or not, she would still worship him because he is Lord, and because she could count on his mercy.

Dr. Keith Brantley served as a medical missionary in Liberia, West Africa. In 2014, an epidemic of the Ebola virus swept through Liberia. Over the course of 21 months, more than 11,000 people died from the virus. No one was safe. Healthy people died within days of being infected. So, imagine Dr. Brantley's fear when he began manifesting symptoms of the disease. He put himself on immediate quarantine. His colleagues couldn't come near him. His family was back in the U.S. He had to deal with his illness and his fears all alone. So, he picked up his Bible and took his desperation to the Lord. Dr. Brantley found comfort in a passage from Hebrews 4:16: "Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need." This verse became his focus for prayer over the next few days as his pain and nausea increased.

When tests confirmed that Dr. Brantley had contracted Ebola, he called his wife, Amber, in Texas to give her the news. Amber Brantley reports that her fear and sadness were so great that she had trouble finding the words to pray. So instead, she simply sang hymns of trust, praising God in spite of their situation. The Brantleys took their need to Jesus in different ways, each one trusting in God's mercy and love no matter what His answer was to their prayers.

Dr. Brantley's colleagues arranged to have him flown to Atlanta for an experimental treatment for Ebola. Within a few days, his condition began to improve. And God mercifully answered the Brantley's prayers when, a short time later, Dr. Brantley walked out of that Atlanta hospital as a survivor of the Ebola virus.

Of course, not everyone who trusts in Jesus and suffers a serious disease walks out of the hospital cured. If they do not walk out of the hospital cured, however, that does not mean their prayers were in vain. If they do not walk out of the hospital cured, they walk into the arms of Jesus with a new perfect body made whole at last.

Jesus complimented this Canaanite woman for her great faith. Great faith is pretty simple, at least by Jesus' standards. Bring your desperation to him and trust in God's love for you. The God who gave up His power and majesty and ultimately His life to save us from the power of death loves you too much to ever turn you away. Desperate times don't always call for desperate measures, but desperate times always call for Jesus.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

Sing, Listen, or Read Hymn "Help Us Accept Each Other" #754

1. Help us accept each other as Christ accepted us; teach us as sister, brother, each person to embrace. Be present, Lord, among us and bring us to believe we are ourselves accepted and meant to love and live.

2. Teach us, O Lord, your lessons, as in our daily life we struggle to be human and search for hope and faith. Teach us to care for people, for all not just for some, to love them as we find them or as they may be come.

3. Let your acceptance change us, so that we may be moved in living situations to do the truth in love; to practice your acceptance until we know by heart the table of forgiveness and laughter's healing art.

4. Lord, for today's encounters with all who are in need, who hunger for acceptance, for righteousness and bread, we need new eyes for seeing, new hands for holding on: renew us with your Spirit; Lord, free us, make us one!

Blessing

Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. 2 Peter 3:18