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Pentecost 13

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
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“*My Theology or His?*”
Text: Matthew 15:21-28

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

There are two ways of looking at your life and your relationship with God. The first way is to start with yourself and ask: *How does God fit into my life?* And if you think about that question for a while, the answer you will come up with is this: *He does not fit very well.* For there are things I want that God does not give, and there are things that God gives that I do not want! There are those things I want to do that God tells me not to do, and those things that God tells me to do that I do not want to do. There are things that God does that, quite frankly, I think He ought to do differently. And God can be very inconvenient, intruding into my life at the worst times, causing trouble just when things started going my way, and really causing quite a mess! . . . And so from that starting point and with those conclusions, the result is that God is very often dismissed and politely shown the door *out* – He’s just not worth the aggravation. Or, if we *graciously* allow Him to stay, it is only in carefully chosen times and places, like holidays, or tragedies, or when I am feeling particularly spiritual.

This first way of thinking of our life and relationship with God is how the world thinks, and how we *all* naturally think. This is the “It’s my life” theology. *It’s my life*, and I’ll do what I want. *It’s my life*, so don’t try to tell me how to live it. *It’s my life*, and what’s right for you might not be right for me. In this theology, we are each the center of our own little universe, with the people and things and gods that we want revolving around us, doing our bidding, and serving us. And it’s a very nice arrangement, if you can get it! Making but never receiving demands; inconveniencing others while never being inconvenienced yourself; being in control and fitting everything into my box.

But what has this theology wrought? It *sounds* nice, but what has it done? The result has been increased conflicts, when my world collides with yours, and we both want our own way. It has caused us to be more and more isolated and lonely, as we all try to set up our own little worlds and ignore others. And it has caused us to no longer recognize love. For love gives and love loves giving; but we have twisted love into loving myself, and loving *getting*. And so the world around us is falling apart, as we each try to save our own little worlds. And Satan, the author of this theology, is lovin’ it!

But there is another way, another theology, another way of looking at your life and your relationship with God – and that is not to start with yourself, but the start with God, and to ask: *How does my life fit into God's life?* And if you think about that question for a while, the answer you will come up with is this: *It does not fit very well.* But now the fault is not God's, but mine. My sin. For it is my unbelief and rebellion that has alienated me from God and His life. It is my disobedience and selfishness that has made me a foreigner to God's holiness. It is my sin that means that death is going to end the life that God gave me. And so as much as we hate to admit it, it is not God who has caused my mess, but me.

And this is true theology, for all true theology starts with God. He is life, and He gives all life. **The Lord and giver of life**, we said in the Creed. And so my life is not mine, but His. I didn't create it, He did. He is the center. As you heard me chant in the Gradual a few moments ago, ***“for from Him and through Him and to Him are all things.”*** And so when Moses asked God what His name was, God told Him: ***I AM.*** (Ex 3) I am who I am. I will be who I will be. That's God's name, and who He is: the One who exists in Himself. That's what we mean when we call Him LORD. Thus saith the LORD – the source of all things. The One who was, and is, and ever shall be. Always the same. The One with no beginning and no ending. The only One who has life in Himself, and so all life comes from Him.

And that brings us to the Holy Gospel we heard today: the Canaanite woman and her encounter with the Lord of life. At first hearing, what happens here sounds pretty bad. A poor woman comes up to Jesus, and first He ignores her, then He rebuffs her, and then He calls her a dog! It certainly doesn't sound like the same Jesus who said, ***“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”*** (Mt 11:28) . . . But maybe the problem is that we are looking at this from the wrong perspective. From the woman's perspective, and how God is fitting into her life and her problem, it sounds pretty bad! But is there more to it than that? What about how her life fits into God's life? And maybe there's more to this life here than meets the eye.

But before we go there, you all know what this woman went through. You know it, because it's happened to you. For in response to her first plea, her first prayer, there is silence. Even though she confesses quite rightly that Jesus is the Lord, the Son of David, she gets no reply. And you've been there. You pray, and sometimes it seems as if God is not listening. You get no answer. It seems as if His back is turned and He doesn't care. Then what do we do?

Well, maybe we do what this woman did, and get *others* to pray for us. She went to the disciples and got after them, for if Jesus won't listen to her, maybe He'll listen to His disciples! Which prompted them to go to Jesus and say: ***“Send her away, for she is crying after us!”*** And we do this, thinking that God hears the prayers of some (like the Pastor) better than others. But instead of her prayer now being answered, she is put off – in essence, told that He is not there for her. And this too has happened to you, when it seems

as if the prayers of others are answered, while yours are not. And we think, *why is God not here for me when I need Him?* . . .

But she does not give up. This woman is a model of persistent prayer. She cuts in front of Jesus and kneels in front of Him (and some translations of the Bible say she worshiped Him! *Even though she wasn't getting an answer!*) and pleads again: **"Lord, help me!"** And then in what you think would be the last straw, Jesus says: **"It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."** But after that final crushing blow, she has one more response; one more glimmer of hope; one last promise to which her faith clings: **"Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."** And she's right! She might be a dog, and she is unworthy of anything from Him, but a crumb is all she needs! She knows that one crumb from Jesus' table is worth more than everything in the world. . . . And here, Jesus has brought her to exactly where He wanted her – to give her not just what she asked for, but much, much more. **To give her life.** About this Luther wrote: "she catches Christ with his own words, and he is happy to be caught." (*Sermons of Martin Luther, The House Postils, Vol. 1, p. 325*)

So was Christ being mean here? Well consider: what would have happened if Jesus had simply granted her request? No muss, no fuss, no struggle. She would have returned with what she had come for, *but nothing more*. She would have returned just as impoverished as when she came. But Jesus wanted much more than that. He didn't want to be just a wish granter or a miracle worker; He didn't want to just fit into her life – He wants to give her life. His life. Real life. Eternal life. . . . For as long as I cling to my life, or what I think is my life, I don't want God's life. I want my life, and I want to make my life better! And if God can do that, good! We want a God who is there when we need Him, but who gets out of our way the rest of the time. *But God wants more for you than that.* And so He sees things a bit differently than we do – in fact, quite the opposite than we do! And what we think is important might not really be all that important at all. **"For what will it profit a man (or a woman, in this case!) if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life?"** (Mt 16:26)

No, for the Lord of life, that simply won't do. He came to be the Messiah, the Saviour, the life-giver. He came not to simply patch up our lives, or fit into our lives *somewhere* – but to be the source of our life, and give us a new life. His life. Real life. Eternal life. But here's the thing: to be given life, you first have to die. For you can only give life to something that does not have life. And so Jesus thrusts a sword into this woman. He must first kill her, so that He can make her alive. And that's not mean – that's love.

And for you and me as well. We too must first be killed. My theology must be put to death. My efforts, my thinking, my plan, my life. No, Jesus says. There is so much more. For as St. Paul wrote: **"If in [or for] this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied."** (1 Cor 15:19) For how little; how small. . . . No, it is not to fit into my life

that Jesus came, but to put me into His life. And so He came to die and rise, that I too may die and rise. That His cross might be my cross, and His life my life. And so He joins us to His cross and resurrection – as we die and rise with Him in Holy Baptism; as I die to myself and my theology in confession and repentance, and rise to life in His absolution; as we eat and drink the body and blood that hung on the cross, that eating of His Supper here, we may eat of it also in the Feast of Heaven that has no end. And through all of these means that our sins would be forgiven; that our lives would not just be patched up, but made new. New lives, to live not just here, but to live forever. To live not just the life that I want, but to live the life that God always intended for us. His life. Real life. Eternal life.

Jesus told His disciples that in Him, ***“you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”*** (John 8:32) I read just recently of someone who then added to that, *“that’s true; but first it’s going to tick you off!”* And Jesus ticks a lot of people off today, doesn’t He? Because He tells the truth – about Himself, and about us. And sometimes the truth hurts. But the sword of His law and repentance and death, Jesus wields not in meanness, but in love. To save me from *my* theology. And thank God that He does! For my theology has no future, no life, no hope. But in Him, we have everything. Forgiveness of sin, life, and salvation.

And so all of us “Canaanites” here today – why are you here? For what are you asking? For a patch? A crumb? Jesus is here to give you much more. That you be not a dog, but a son. To give you not a patch for this life, but a new life. And to feed you not with crumbs, but to give you a seat at His Table. That taking my life to the cross, He would take me to His life, in Heaven.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.