

Lectionary 20 Year A 2020
August 16, 2020

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

In our gospel story this morning Jesus is arguing with the Pharisees about what defiles the body. Jesus points out that what you eat, no matter how you eat it, defiled or not, it all ends up in the same place in the end. In contrast, what we say—what comes out of our mouths—can damage our communities, and that is what truly defiles. Jesus' point is that the Pharisees have a limited view of God's grace and mercy, they see it as very small. They believe God's grace is reserved only for those people who maintain their laws the way that the Pharisees want them maintained. It's almost like they see God's grace and mercy as a puddle. A small body of water that they get to stand around and make decisions about. A puddle, where they alone get to admit or deny access. They see God's grace and mercy as a tiny pool that is easy to contain and understand. Jesus' rebuke of course is that they don't get to decide who is or is not admitted to God's grace!

Perhaps this sounds similar to some churches today, too. Some churches gather around similar puddles as the Pharisees. Puddles of grace and mercy so small that you could step over them by accident. These churches say that we need to believe or act or look a certain way if we want to access this water, this mercy. They fear that there won't be enough grace and mercy to go around, that the puddle might just dry up if they share God's grace too widely. So, we must be their kind of Christian in order to gather around God's puddle of grace. Everyone who is included in God's grace and mercy in these churches stands around the puddle and they can be seen and touched from the shore.

Whole church denominations also have this limited view of God's grace and mercy like a body of water that could contain it. Maybe there's a creek for the Catholics, a lake for the Lutherans, a pond for the Presbyterians, and a bathtub for the Baptists. But we might be afraid that all of these bodies of water could still dry up if God's grace and mercy are shared too widely. These bodies of water, large as they may seem to us when we stand on the shore, we could still walk around them and contain them. We might even be able to see right across to the other side. At the very least we can be sure that only people who are like us, who act or think or believe or look like us, have access to these saving waters of God's grace and mercy.

Right about now, you might be saying to yourself, "This isn't us," we don't limit God's grace like that. But how big, really do we imagine the grace of God? I think we tend to imagine it smaller than we realize. We *might* imagine the grace of God like one of the Great Lakes, so large and vast we can't see the other shore. We know God's grace must include more than just people in our denomination, it must include all liberal Christians, or all conservative Christians. All fundamentalist Christians or all new age Christians. It must include all of us who know that God loves everyone or all of us who know God's grace is exclusive. But even at this size, our view of God's grace still has limits. We may not be able to see the other shore, but we can still imagine it, and we know that the people gathered around our body of water aren't so different from us.

So, returning to our Gospel text, now that Jesus has challenged the Pharisees' limited view of acceptance and inclusion, we should be able to expect Jesus to do what he does best, proclaim the good news of God's grace and mercy to all people, right? Well, that's not exactly what happens. As our Gospel story continues, Jesus encounters a Canaanite woman. Now, Canaanites were their own ethnic group. They didn't believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and they didn't share any culture or customs with the Israelites. This woman who comes to

Jesus is an outsider and a stranger to him in almost every way that we might imagine. So, when the Canaanite woman first addresses Jesus, he simply won't speak to her. When he does finally address her, only at the urging of his disciples, it's only to clearly state his mission. "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." If we were to describe Jesus' grace right now as a body of water, it would be like a lake, maybe even a Great Lake. But this grace that Jesus is offering is still limited. This Great Lake of grace, the Canaanite woman argues, is still too small. For her, it might as well be the puddle that the Pharisees guard.

But we like our Great Lake of God's grace and mercy. We get to be a part of something that is big, but not too big; inclusive, but not too inclusive. The problem is that it starts to fall apart when we find ourselves, like Jesus, in an encounter with a person who is vastly different from us. Jesus, because of his culture and upbringing, can't imagine that he and any Canaanite woman would have anything in common, let alone a common need for God's saving grace and mercy. Jesus, with his cultural assumptions, thinks that this woman could not possibly be permitted to receive God's mercy. But what he finds is that this woman has needs just like his own.

So Jesus, moved with compassion and awed by her faith, agrees with her. If God's grace and mercy are just lakes, even Great Lakes, then they are too small. When Jesus truly encounters the Canaanite woman, and not just the stereotype his culture gave to him, he realizes that God's mercy is bigger than he realized. God's mercy must be an ocean.

I have a friend named Dusty who grew up inland in South Carolina. Now you might think that since South Carolina is a coastal state, he would be familiar with big bodies of water. But because Dusty lived inland and South Carolina isn't the land of lakes that Michigan is, he had never been to a body of water where he couldn't see the opposite shore. He had never seen a body of water he couldn't walk around and end up right back where he started. It wasn't until he was 8 years old that he finally got to go to the beach. His mother tried to prepare him, "The ocean," she told him "is very big. Bigger than anything you've ever seen." But an 8-year-old Dusty was sure it couldn't be that big, it was just maybe like a really, really, big pond or lake. But when they got to the ocean, Dusty was only a few steps onto the beach when he broke down and wept. The size of the ocean was so large that Dusty simply couldn't comprehend it. He had never seen anything so massive that it disappeared with the horizon in three different directions.

This is God's grace and mercy. It's not a tiny puddle, mighty river, or even a Great Lake, it is the ocean! Not even *an* ocean, but the *whole* ocean. God's grace and mercy are like the one body of water that surrounds and encompasses every land mass, every person on this earth. It is so large and vast that when we stand on our shore not only can we not see that other side, but we cannot imagine who stands on the opposite shore. People and places that don't look like us, or act like us or even believe like us, all claim these same waters. The same ocean that laps at our shores here in America washes up on the coasts of South America, Africa, Asia, every island and every continent.

This is the ocean in our baptismal font. This vast sea of grace and mercy that touches every piece of land, that waters and nourishes every person in every place, this water connects us all. And there is plenty of water to go around. The ocean in the baptismal font is large enough to drench the lost sheep of the house of Israel with salvation, and soak the Canaanites in mercy. It is large enough for you and for me. Jesus understands that he and the Canaanite woman are not different people standing at different bodies of water. No, they are on different coasts but they are connected by the waters of the one ocean that covers all the world. Jesus comes to understand that the waters he thought were only for those like him, are abundant enough for all. For *all*. As

Jesus continues his ministry, his view of God's grace gets wider and wider until the very last few verses of Matthew's Gospel where we receive the Great Commission. "Go therefore and baptize *all nations*." Go and tell everyone on every shoreline and coast, standing around every Great Lake, river, puddle and pool, everyone inland and parched in the desert that these waters, this ocean is for them.

And this ocean is for us too. Even when we feel far away from God's love, landlocked and far from the ocean shore, God sends the water from that ocean up into the sky to rain down grace, mercy, love and forgiveness on our heads wherever we are. In this water, God reminds us each time of our baptism, when we were called and claimed, drenched in mercy and love. This rain of mercy fills the puddles and the ponds, the creeks, lakes, rivers, and even the bathtubs. This vast ocean of God's grace and mercy has water enough for the whole world, for the far-flung peoples on distant coasts, and for you and me. God's vast ocean of grace and mercy is for everyone, everywhere, in every time and place. Thanks be to God. Amen.