

# Sermon for Sunday, August 20, 2017 - "May We Be Disturbed"

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost  
August 20, 2017  
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Decorah, Iowa  
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## May We Be Disturbed

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

This is a loud, chaotic and troubling story. A woman cries out to Jesus for help and he doesn't answer her. His disciples start yelling, "send her away." Then Jesus makes things noisier by bringing animals into the mix. He evokes images of bleating lost sheep and ravenous dogs who want the children's food. He basically calls the woman a dog. That's more than a little unsettling. This is a noisy, disturbing story.

Lately our country has also been loud, chaotic and troubling. It's tempting to want to avoid anything else that will disturb us. Yet to be healed, sometimes we need to be disrupted and challenged, just as the disciples and Jesus were by this woman. So, let's enter this story seeking God's wisdom and mercy for us today.

An outsider, a foreigner, approaches Jesus crying out for mercy. She isn't just any foreigner; she's a Canaanite, an ancient enemy of Israel. And she's shouting. The disciples see her as a threat, a scavenging dog trying to break into the sheepfold of the people of Israel. She's trying to get something that isn't hers to have. They leap into the fray like attack dogs guarding the gate. They shout to Jesus, "get rid of her."

The English translation of this passage doesn't capture it; but the cries of the woman and the shouts of the disciples rise in competing choruses.

The woman doesn't just cry out to Jesus once. In the Greek, she keeps on saying, "Kyrie elesion - have mercy on me, Lord." The disciples also repeat their words. They keep on saying to Jesus, "get rid of her" - in Greek, "apolyson."

There's some irony here - the Canaanite woman uses the language of faith and worship, "kyrie elesion". The disciples' "apolyson" contains similar sounds but vastly different content.

So, who is acting like the lost sheep Jesus was sent to save and who is acting like a dog? The woman who gets called a "dog" repeatedly *bleats* "kyrie elesion" while the supposed "lost sheep" continually *bark* back in reply, "apolyson - get rid of her."

Jesus doesn't send the "dog" away, but he also refuses to let her in. He even gets in a pretty harsh lick at her. He says it isn't fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs. Yet this woman doggedly persists in seeking mercy. She keeps on crying "kyrie elesion" and "help me." She keeps on kneeling before Jesus - the posture of worship. She asks Jesus for crumbs, the leftovers from the master's table after the children are fed. Perhaps she's aware that right before this story Jesus fed more than 5000

people. When all ate and had their fill, there were 12 baskets left over. The crumbs from this master's table are nothing to scoff at.

As she cries for mercy, as she kneels before Jesus, as she persists in faith, the Canaanite woman looks more and more like the sheep Jesus has been sent to save. This impacts Jesus. He commends her for her faith and heals her daughter. And from this point on in the Gospel of Matthew, his ministry includes more foreigners, more outsiders.

This encounter seems to show Jesus that his flock is bigger than the people of Israel. It seems to remind him of the wideness of God's mercy - a theme expressed in our first reading and throughout the Old Testament.

Jesus seems changed by this disturbing encounter with a foreign woman.

The same thing can happen for us. God can and does work through disturbing encounters to bring healing and change for us and our world.

So, let's not avoid things that might disrupt us. Let's listen to the cries for help today, to the stories that trouble us. It's so easy for us to feel safe and secure in our little sheepfold, isolated from the chorus of hurting and angry voices. It's so easy for us to think the problems are caused by other people - by white supremacists and unhelpful responses to them.

But today, let's allow ourselves to be challenged by the voices of black people crying out for their children to feel safe on the streets, crying out after centuries of not feeling secure in the fold, not having a place at the table. Sometimes, to those of us inside the gate, these voices sound threatening and scary like ravenous dogs barking. Can we hear in them lost sheep crying out for mercy? Can we see all people as lost sheep Jesus was sent to save? Even as we completely reject the words and actions of white supremacists, we cannot demonize them - they and all of us need to be saved.

Today let's take a hard look at how we respond to people crying out in pain. Do we remain silent? Do we try to keep them out? We may not shout "apolyson" like the disciples do; we would never join a neo-Nazi rally. Yet we have so many other more subtle, but still painful, ways of shutting out hurting people and their needs.

This story invites us to listen to those cries that disturb us and then to join our voices with them saying, "kyrie eleison". In the midst of the angry, chaotic voices we are called to use our voices to cry for mercy, to work for mercy.

This story also invites us to take a posture of dogged yet humble persistence in seeking mercy and healing. Rather than taking up posts as watchdogs against threats, we're encouraged to kneel before the shepherd pleading for the healing of our world. We're asked to take a stance of humility seeking to learn and understand from others. We're called to join foreigners and outcasts seeking safe pasture and help.

All of this can push us out of our comfort zones. It can make our lives more noisy and chaotic. It can cause disturbances in our little sheepfolds. Yet, all of this can open us to the healing and mercy that God is always working for us and for our world.

O God, may we experience and share your healing and mercy. Kyrie eleison.

Let's join our voices in crying "Kyrie eleison" by singing one petition of the Kyrie found on page 2 in your booklet.