

## Reminiscere, the Second Sunday in Lent, A ✕ D 2011

### Matthew 15:21-28

*In the Name of the Father and of the ✕ Son and of the Holy Spirit.*

1 The only desirable virtue of modern man is niceness. Gone are the cardinal virtues of wisdom, justice, temperance, and courage. Gone are the spiritual virtues of faith, hope, and love. Niceness remains. All the commandments take a backseat to this exhortation: be nice to one another. Play nice, parents exhort their children. Every girl wants a nice man. You hope the new neighbors are nice. And one of the worst social epithets that could be uttered against you is that you're not a nice person. So what? Nice is not a virtue in Scripture. In fact, the word "nice" appears nowhere in any common English translation of Sacred Scripture. "Be nice" is not the same as "love your neighbor as yourself." Niceness, to the modern ear, is milquetoast spinelessness, a refusal to speak the truth, a fear of offending. And yet, nice is what we suppose every good parent wants his child to be.

2 Jesus, however, isn't nice. Oh, He's everything virtuous: He's the perfect fulfillment of God's Law. He possesses all the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. He is sinless and without blemish. But He's not nice, not at least how most people understand niceness. His goal is not to avoid hurting your feelings or to refrain from offending you.

3 If you were hoping for a Mr. Nice Guy Jesus, the Gospel reading for Reminiscere will always shock you. It must have taken a fair amount of courage for this Canaanite woman to approach Jesus. She knew the relationship between the Israelites and the Canaanites: they were enemies. Yet she came to Jesus to pray to Him for mercy, because she must have heard and believed the promise God had given to Abraham, "In your Seed, all the nations of the earth will be blessed" (Ge 22:18). So she came to the Seed of Abraham, the promised descendant of Abraham, in whom all nations, all people, would be blessed by a God rich in grace and abundant in mercy. And to the Canaanite woman's humble prayer, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon," how does Jesus reply? Not a word.

4 But she persists. Eventually, her persistence becomes a burden to the disciples who have to listen to it. So they intercede for her: "Lord, send her away, for she is crying out after us." But Jesus answers them, "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Undeterred, the woman descends, prostrating herself before Jesus and praying, "Lord, help me." Ignored and dismissed, she should have quit while she was ahead, it seems, because now Jesus levels a harsh insult at her: "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." Now, he's called her a dog, a Canaanite dog.

5 Everything in this story is wrong. You want to grab the woman by the shoulders and pull her to her feet. "Save some dignity and self-respect. Don't do this to yourself. This won't turn out well for you. Quit groveling." And to Jesus, whom you were banking on to be the nicest guy in the world, you want to give quite the tongue lashing. If He were your pastor, you'd have words like these for Him: "You can't talk to visitors that way! You'll drive them away! And all this talk of sin and repentance is tiresome. Why can't you just be nicer to people?"

6 But this is not the woman's reaction to Jesus insult. Rather than be hurt by Jesus' words, she simply acknowledged the truth of what He's spoken, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table." She'll happily be a dog as long as Jesus will give her the same consideration that anyone would give a dog. And she knows by faith that mere crumbs of Jesus' mercy will be more than enough. She doesn't need a nice guy Jesus. She needs a merciful Savior. She's willing to endure His true words about her—"you are a dog and not deserving of what I come to bring"—because she knows mercy is not about getting what you deserve.

7 Learn from this Canaanite woman, this outsider, the true nature of repentant faith. Let Jesus offend you; let Him speak the truth about you, even if it's an insulting truth. Stop getting your feelings hurt when

God through His Law calls you a sinner. Stop looking for a nice, milquetoast Jesus. Look for a kind, gentle, merciful Jesus, whose kindness refuses to ignore your sin, whose gentleness speaks words of correction, words designed to evoke repentance, whose mercy is intended to give you what you because of your sin could never deserve. Learn to confess with this woman this wonderful truth: even the dogs get the crumbs; even sinners dine with Jesus; even those infected with these sins, even those who because of the corruption of original sin are rendered sub-human, are welcomed by the Lord who declared to the Canaanite woman, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire."

8 A fictitious nice-guy-Jesus is for people who have no self-awareness, no understanding of the nature of their sin. If sin is no big deal, then you don't need a Savior, just a nice guy. But that's not Jesus. Better than nice, Jesus is merciful. Better than treating you with kid gloves and side stepping the issue, Jesus calls you to repent of your sinfulness so that He can have the same mercy on you as He had on this woman. An effeminate, spineless, nice-guy-Jesus wouldn't have died for sins. But a merciful Jesus, who knows forgiveness is not free, is willing to have mercy at any cost, even His own life.

9 The Gospel is more comforting than that. Forgiveness is real, just as your sins were. Jesus gives you no insipid niceness; He gives you mercy, real mercy, mercy that He purchased with His holy, precious blood, and with His innocent suffering and death. Real sins need a real Savior. Through Him, you are a dog, a sinner, no more. By God's mercy, you likewise are a true Israelite by faith, a beloved child of God. The same faith Jesus praised in the woman has been delivered to you through Holy Baptism. Great is your faith, faith delivered to you, faith preserved through God's Word and sacraments, faith which trusts in Christ completely for mercy, repentant faith which sees nothing good in yourself. And you feast on far better than crumbs. Your Lord continues to give you His mercy through His very Body and Blood. With Jesus, there are no crumbs. You get His true flesh and blood for the complete forgiveness of your sins. And yet, feast though this is, the Body and Blood of Jesus in, with, and under bread and wine are only crumbs compared to the feast that awaits you at His return.

10 Christian love is not "play nice." It's "love your neighbor." Forgiven people forgive. Those who have been shown mercy show mercy. Nice would have been to leave you as you were: a sinner, an outsider, a dog. Merciful is to have made you who you are: a beloved child of God, an insider, a part of the Body of Christ.

*In the Name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit.*

Pastor Jeff Hemmer