

Nativity Lutheran Church
Palm Beach Gardens, FL
August 20, 2017

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Text: St. Matthew 15:(10-20)21-28
Theme: No IFs, ANDs, or BUTS

In Nomine Jesu

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Listen up here, OK? I'm starting with a German word for you today. God's time is the "allerbester" – always the best – time. Johan Sebastian Bach wrote a marvelous cantata with that title. *Gottes Zeit ist der allerbester Zeit.* And it proved to be true this past week as our daughter Andrea's daughter ... Magdalena Grace ... was born at 8:05 p.m. on Wednesday, August 16 - God's "allerbester" birthday for God's newest gift to our family and the world. I'll confess that her grandma and I had hoped for Monday, August 14, though.

Why? Well, August 14, has always been a special day in our family ... you haven't had a chance to get to know us very well, so this gives me a little bit of a chance to correct that.

For starters, it's the birthdate of my sainted Father-in Law. His name was Waldemar ... wonder why he always called himself "Wally"? But I called him Dad. He did all sorts of "dad stuff" with me ... a "fishaholic" ... a great wood worker. He taught me how to design and cut and glue and sand and shape creations like a litter box for our breeding Cocker Spaniel. [For you uninitiated, it's got a different function than a litter box for cats.] He truly was a wonderful "Dad" to me, especially since my own Dad was pretty remote.

Remote? Well, physical distance was one thing ... ever since I got married we had never lived less than a thousand miles from my folks until we moved to Columbus, Ohio. That was a bit better. But it wasn't just miles. It was ... well, the way he was ... I am, more than I like. He'd be pained to hear this, because he never could accept himself for what he was, never was very confident in himself either.

But that's not all the August 14 stuff. Our son was also born on August 14. Matthew Paul ... for a long time we tried to resist calling him "Matt" but he won the war on that one. Matt and Wally would have great shared birthday celebrations each year. Always something different ... maybe Wally would make a new toy in his workshop and maybe Matt would figure out how to say "Grandpa." Maybe Wally would take some time to spend with Matt to take him fishing – Matt's real joy when he was a kid and to this day since he just turned 40. He's still never more than a few feet from a fishing rod. But there was always home-churned ice cream. And guess who got that job for the guests of

honor? You've got it ... me! That's after Matt got tired of turning the crank after about 10 seconds and after Wally smilingly declined the opportunity to help.

But one thing Wally was good at was unconditional love. Matt knew it. I knew it. Andrea, our daughter, knew it. And Donna, his daughter, knew it. But maybe Matt best of all, because he wasn't an Anglo by birth, but a Korean – he was born in Seoul. Came here, disgorged from a huge 747 at JFK airport in New York City, when he was three months' old. Came here, born healthy but "behind the 8-ball" in terms of physical development. We guess his birth mom hadn't been able or chose not to give him adequate prenatal care. Always small for his age ... even by Korean standards, let alone American ... but always confident and positive because he knew how much he was loved. At least early on. And Wally was at the head of that line of unconditional and generous lovers for him.

Sad to say, his other Grandpa, my Dad, wasn't. Oh, my Dad never failed or forgot to talk about his love for Matt ... and me, and Andrea, and Donna. But he just couldn't bring himself to live it so we could feel it. Perhaps especially Matt and Andrea. When we wanted to go to Manitowoc, Wisconsin to see him and my mom shortly after Matt came to live in our family, Dad advised us that it wouldn't be a good idea. "Folk around here don't know how to deal with others that aren't like them, you know, mixed race families and things." I don't think he even remembered that, at least later in life. But we can't help but recall.

Or a few years later when Mom and Dad had moved to Sheboygan, Wisconsin and we finally got to visit them ... I guess folk in Sheboygan are different than folk in Manitowoc, even though it's only a twenty minute drive away. By this time Matt was big enough to play catch. So he and I went outside and I threw a ball to Matt on the sidewalk that he didn't catch. So he ran after it and caught up with it on the sidewalk right in front of a neighbor who started yelling at him. We learned that he was a Vietnam Vet who, understandably, was scarred by his war experiences, but all he saw in Matt was another potential Viet Cong to be put aside. So Matt came running back and he and I went into the house only to be told by Grandpa that we couldn't play catch on the sidewalk any more unless that fellow wasn't home.

Unconditional love? Well, suffice it to say that to this day, neither Matt nor I nor Donna nor Andrea have been able to figure out why Matt had to pay the price instead of his Grandpa going to the neighbor and letting him know a little about love and openness.

No, unconditional love is not something Matt became very familiar with. And because he learned that he couldn't count on it outside of our home, he even began to wonder whether he could count on it inside. So guess what he did ... and we can chuckle about it together now, but it was hard to do so then. He did

everything he could to test our love. And there are a lot really good stories I could share about that here, but I'll spare him and us the invasion of privacy. Suffice it to say that it took until after he was married ... and I really think until he and Carol gave us and the world a blessing in our other four grandkids in their family ... for Matt to realize that he had and has that kind of love in our home and family.

No IFs, No ANDs, No Buts. That kind of love. The kind of love that doesn't shrink in fear or distaste or disapproval from anyone else. Christ's kind of love for us. The kind of love he showed that Canaanite woman in our text.

And oh wow, wasn't she a case? First of all ... wrong color, wrong race, wrong side of the tracks for a home, and wrong gender. And add to that the fact that she was a feisty, protective, assertive mom. It adds up to a real challenge for a first century male ... which Jesus surely was. And his disciples proved that challenge by asking Jesus to just get rid of her ... like a pesky fly ... away from their important conversation, if you please.

But Jesus was more than a first century male. He was God's love ... God's unconditional love ... incarnate. We know that, of course. How else could we have any hope or future since we depend on it through his suffering, death, and resurrection. It's always there for our salvation, forgiveness, freedom, and hope. Yup, it could hardly surprise us that he shows that kind of love to this woman.

But it sure didn't sound like "unconditional love" at first, did it. Not to her, I bet. **"I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,"** he said. And she heard – as even the disciples heard, "Not for Canaanite trash like you who don't even know their place!"

She did the unthinkable. In the face of that apparent insult and dismissal, she said two things:

"Lord, Help me" – which got still another apparent rebuke about children's food and dogs from Jesus – and then a word of bold challenge to that dismissal, **"Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."** To which Jesus, smiling and with a twinkling eye now revealed the unconditional nature of his love for her said, **"Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish."**

And what was it that was to be done? Not acceptance because of her bold and feisty and challenging manner. No. Not acceptance to the inner core of Jewish relationships or even as a baker's dozen addition to the disciples. No. It was healing for her daughter. Willingness to put herself at risk, in the faith that Jesus was not just what he had promised, but more than he had promised. Her Savior. Her Lord. And, yes, her child's.

Now there are a ton of points I could make about this text and its truth and call in our lives, but I want to make just one. Put yourself in our son Matt's shoes ... experiencing professed but not lived out love from a Granddad and a lot of others in his life. Put yourself in this unnamed Canaanite woman's shoes ... willing to risk life and limb [that was the punishment for blasphemy with which she could have been charged] for the sake of her daughter only to experience rejection ... at least it felt that way at first ... from the one in whom she had put her hope for health and salvation for her daughter, and herself.

Ever felt that way? Awful, isn't it. And if you haven't felt it, I feel sorry for you, because I can guarantee that that's how somebody has felt at one time or another in your presence and in mine.

"OK, pastor, now you've gone too far. You know I pride myself on being an open and accepting person ... just like this congregation. I ... we ... we're friendly and warm."

To which I say, "Of course you are ... and I know that that's what you and we strive to be – when we're on our best behavior. But we aren't always on our best behavior. There are limits to what we can live with. Not like Jesus."

All too often I've found "friendly" congregations to be that ... for folk that have been friends for a long time, but perhaps not so easily friendly to the stranger who comes among us ... especially the estranged ones, the challenging or feisty ones, who put us to the test. And all too often I've found that true of individuals who consider themselves warm and open and inviting and friendly. Like me.

So let me tell you about Dean. He was homeless ... because his mom kept kicking him out when she couldn't take him anymore. He was a mentally ill person who has the rare gift of hiding his illness behind a façade of what we call grandiosity. Add to that his ability to manipulate people with his victim role and worm his way into positions of trust and then becoming frightening to those around him because of his breaches of trust and boundaries. I could go on and on. But I won't. My job ... loving, caring guy that I am ... was to, for his own good, get Dean away from the congregation I was serving and he was coming to in Columbus and into a situation of care that could give him the kind of healing care and love he needs. No IFs, ANDs, or BUTs. But when I told him he needed to stop abusing his relationship with our congregation for his own good and I needed take him to a place where he could get help he felt it as anything but unconditional love. Just like Matt. Just like the woman in our text.

Who do you know that is feeling like Matt ... or that Canaanite woman ... or Dean ... in your circle of relationships and life? You won't have to look hard. Just,

maybe, where it's a bit uncomfortable to look. And then ... be Jesus to them. Be one who is willing to risk a relationship of unconditional love for that person, just like Jesus has loved and embraced you. And then expect amazing things to happen. Because of your faith in Jesus' love for you and for all people.

That's the treat Magdalena Grace is getting and going to get from her mom and her dad and her grandma and her grandpa and her whole extended family ... imperfect lovers as we are ... but God's lovers for her none-the-less. God's counting on us. Just as he's counting on you in your family and the lives you touch.

In the Name of Jesus.

AMEN.

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Soli Deo Gloria