

“Grace: the Resilience of God”

Psalm 133; Matthew 15:21-28 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might open our hearts to the presence of your grace in our lives and be restored for the sake of love. In Jesus' name, Amen.

August, am I right?! Just a few weeks ago, I was hearing laments about how 2020 is the worst year ever, and then I realized that August was coming and dread filled my soul. Sincere apologies to those of you born this month; you are clearly the shining redemption of an otherwise dependably rotten ordeal. I don't know if it's because by August we've all just been too hot for too long, or because Congress goes into recess, so we stir up other hornets' nests, or what, but August has always seemed like trouble to me. And this is not a year that needed more trouble.

This year, August seems to be the moment when we're finally absorbing that this thing we're going through is a marathon, not a sprint. It's dawning on us that it's going to last long enough to justify major adjustments to make it work better, rather than pretending we can get by because it will be over soon. The challenge, though, in designing those adjustments is that we're five months in, and we're exhausted, numb, and cranky. Not exactly the head or heart space that's most likely to produce the inspiring, creative solutions we so desperately need. We're having trouble being human right now, let alone church. And then August has the gall to push its overheated, trouble-making, violence-prone self into our lives.

I mention all of this because, as we've been noticing the past couple weeks, Jesus hasn't been having a great August either. First his cousin John died. Then when he tried to get away to grieve and pray, he's followed by crowds of people clamoring for his healing powers. He heals; he feeds. He finally gets some alone time by staying up all night to pray, but then when he tries to re-join the disciples, they're freaked out by his arrival because they still don't quite get him. They land on the other side of the lake and are immediately surrounded by more crowds grasping at him for healing, but this time it's followed up with harassment by Pharisees.

Does all that sound stressful? This is the set-up for what I might argue is one of the most pivotal moments in Jesus' ministry. So maybe it's not that surprising that he almost ruins it. Yes, I said that: Jesus almost ruins it. I know there are some interpreters who want us to see that Jesus was just testing this woman whose daughter is suffering, but first of all, that requires a lot of textual contortions, and second of all, how is Jesus *testing a woman whose daughter is suffering* an improvement on what really happened? I refuse to believe that is what is happening here. Jesus is exhausted, and in the story we read today, it finally catches up with him. He's grumpy. He's withholding. He's rude. And that's okay. The way Jesus almost ruins this moment is part of what makes it so pivotal.

Now this is easy for us to say because we know how the story ends, namely, with Jesus sending the disciples out to "the ends of the earth" to spread the gospel. In the moment, I'm pretty sure this interaction felt like it must have been August. But

imagine you're God, and you've sent your Messiah to save the whole world, but because of the way humanity works, this Messiah is deeply embedded in one culture, with all the baggage that comes along with it. How do you expand that Messiah's worldview to include those who aren't children of Abraham? Perhaps you help a Canaanite woman whose daughter is suffering to find her way onto his path. Surely his compassionate heart will respond to her need and thus broaden the mission?

Oh, except it's August. That is, Jesus is tired and hot and grieving and stressed and exhausted. So he doesn't respond compassionately; he snaps at her. He's snide, and insulting, and quite frankly, a little bigoted. You can just imagine God thinking, "Whoa, somebody needs a nap! Time for Plan B." And that's really what I want to talk about today, that Plan B. Because God didn't let Jesus' exhaustion ruin the moment. Instead, God switched up the plan and let the Spirit's transforming power move through the Canaanite woman instead. Her desperation was not enough to stop her from using her wits and her wit to change Jesus' attitude. It's not hard to imagine there might even have been laughter involved. I'm guessing that, contrary to his expectations when they first heard her shouting, Jesus actually walked away from this interaction feeling re-energized. So what happened?

I want to explore this because I really think we need to be able to claim what happened here for our own lives. Just like Jesus, we're tired and hot and grieving and stressed and exhausted. Our compassion is thin; our tendency to snap is at an all-time high. Could we dare to hope that God could use vessels this cracked up?

There's a word I've been seeing around a lot since the pandemic set in. The word is resilience. I believe I used it myself, just last week in the Children's Moment. I hope we're willing to believe that we grown-ups are as resilient as we keep hoping our kids are, but what I've been thinking about this week is the resilience of God. That's a weird phrase, isn't it? We prefer to think of God as omnipotent and eternal. To think of God as resilient sort of implies that God goes through hard times. But if we believe that God loves us and we know what we know about the state of humanity, is it really that hard to imagine God going through hard times? And yet, despite what a mess we're making of things, God keeps loving us and keeps finding ways to work out God's purposes for creation. Normally, we might call that grace, and that's one very good word for it. But in our current circumstances, I think we might find it helpful to define grace as the resilience of God and to hold onto that as tightly as we can.

I'll be honest: I don't always feel sure about how we're going to get through this. We've had so few moments to catch our breath. The hits just keep coming. Right when everyone else needs us to be at our compassionate best, we're at our lowest and least hopeful. And that's just as individuals. What is happening to us as a church? Some people are engaging with our worship kit; many are not. Some are showing up on Zoom for fellowship gatherings and meetings; many more are not. Some of you are intentionally staying in touch with fellow members, but others feel forgotten and haven't been able to reach out themselves.

We're not going to get through this by the power of our own good will. We're not going to have a church to come back to as a result of our own striving to hold things together and keep people's attention, though I welcome your help in holding things together and giving some of your attention to your church family. Now and into an unknown number of months, we are going to have to lean hard on the grace that is the resilience of God. That is what heals our hearts when we've been short with one another, when our compassion ran dry and we didn't call the person who was hurting, when we were hurting and no one else had the strength to listen to our pain. When our resilience wears thin, the resilience of God can bear us up and fill the gaps. I know this because I've already seen it happening.

When I see people that I know aren't engaging with our weekly worship kits continuing to reach out to ask for prayer when hard things come up in their lives or their friends', I know the resilience of God is continuing to knit our community together. When I see that our giving is holding steady – steadier than most summers even – despite the various alternative methods we have to use right now to receive it, I know that the resilience of God is working in our hearts. When I see a new willingness to adjust cherished annual traditions to allow us to show our neighbors we're still here for them, I know the resilience of God is breaking through. And I give thanks, because it's quite clear we won't get through without it.

What is true for our church life is true for our personal lives as well. When the edges between you and everyone else have gotten jagged and raw, it's time to seek out

the resilience of God to mend and heal those relationships. When your tendency to snipe on social media has overwhelmed your capacity to see others as fellow beloved children of God, it's time to seek out the resilience of God. You may not feel a shred of compassion or patience or endurance left in any corner of your soul, but grab hold of your capacity to trust in God's grace and don't let go. God's resilience can carry you through to a better day, when your own is tapped out. God did it for Jesus, and God will do it for you.

And sometimes, you'll be the Canaanite woman in this story, the one through whom the resilience of God works, despite your grief or pain. Whenever we can, if there's just an ounce of hope left within us, we can be the ones who help others find that grace. We can turn what seems wrong upside down to help someone gain a new perspective. We can hold it lightly enough to invite in the healing balm of laughter and change someone's attitude. The psalmist talks about unity, comparing it to the anointing oil that runs down Aaron's beard. God's grace is what calls us into unity, and just as the oil anointed Aaron for ministry, the unity of our church, made strong by the resilience of God, is not for its own sake, but for the sake of our ministry to God's world. We are cracked vessels, clay jars through whom the grace that is God's resilience can work healing for ourselves and for the strangers we will meet along the way. Thanks be to God! Hallelujah and Amen!