

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God, our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The sermon text is the Gospel lesson we've just heard. We pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

This story in the New Testament belongs to those that are a little bit disconcerting, even if it does have a happy end. Matthew describes in great detail, first, that this woman needed help desperately because her child was deathly ill, then how Jesus simply ignored her and put her off twice by denying her help, claiming he wasn't responsible for her because she was a gentile. Now I'd be willing to bet a large amount of money that for most of us, that simply doesn't fit in with our picture of Jesus. Our image of him is, on the whole, one of an accepting friend, a helpful savior, a caring and loving person—the very opposite of how we see him here, at least at the beginning. In addition, we know that Jesus made it a point to serve and preach to the non Jews he encountered. In doing so he demonstrated that he had come to be the savior of all people. So his actions just don't make a lot of sense. And the thought that Jesus could possibly ignore me or put me off, when I come to him with my hurts and hopes—and most especially when I plea to him, like the woman in this text did, on behalf my own dear child who is sick or hurting—well that doesn't appeal to me in the least.

It's interesting to read commentaries and sermons on this passage. Almost all of them try to elucidate Jesus' unusual actions. Their attempts at explanation range from the biorhythmical: He was having a bad day, to the theological: There were limitations in his mission before he was raised from the dead, even up to psychological: that in a bizarre form of reverse-psychology he was egging on the

poor woman on into belief—that he was providing the friction that eventually made the pearl of faith. None of these reasons fully explain why he acted the way he did. But today I'm not going to offer an explanation of his actions, because I'm firmly convinced that we'll never be fully able to understand him anyway, and that it would be folly to attempt that. I know, that's not a very satisfying approach to this issue, because we really like to be able to understand the reason for God's doing what he does, and we suffer a little, when we don't understand it. But that's just the way it is. So, once again, I'm not going to offer an explanation. Instead I'm going to urge you to react with faith, trust and perseverance, even if you don't understand or don't like God's actions.

I took part once in an ecumenical children's Bible workshop. Our topic was the story of Cain and Abel. In the service we had at the end of the workshop, the Catholic priest spoke to the children about why God looked in favor on Abel's offering and why he rejected Cain's. But if you read the passage carefully, you'll see: There is no explanation of God's actions. He did what he did. In that respect the story of Cain and Abel is similar to our sermon text today. The important thing in this OT story, too, is not understanding God—who could ever really do that—but reacting in a faithful way. Cain showed us one way of reacting when you can't understand God and his actions and don't like them. He went out and killed his brother.

The woman that went to Jesus, however, shows us the much, much better way, which is why Jesus wound up praising her faith and trust. Similarly, I will hold up her faith and trust as an example for you and me this morning and say: Go and do

likewise. When times get rough—and they do for all of us—when the physical and emotional pain of life comes, when that doctor brings you the bad news, when every signal you’re getting with your eyes and ears indicates that God has given up on you—flee to that same God, entrust yourself unto him, pray with all your heart to the God who seems to be so cold in his silence or so brutal in his abandonment, put yourself in the very hands that you think are clenched in a fist to strike you. That is the stick-to-it-iveness of faith, the tenacity of trusting in God, to which each and every one of us is called. In reality, that kind of stubborn faith, clinging to God even if he seems to be the enemy, is really only a mirror of the persistent and dogged faithfulness that Christ shows towards us. He doesn’t give us up for lost or abandon us when we fall in sin or turn our backs on him. We are baptized, which means that Christ is in it for the long haul with us. And thank God, we can be sure of his forgiveness and certain of our salvation, come what may. So, in dire times turn from the God you may not understand to the one you love—to the one who has showed you his grace time and time again—even here in this church building. And please know: I can’t always promise the happy end of this Bible passage, that everything will turn out good, or that you will, as they say in the children’s books, live happily ever after. But I do know that you will live forever, and that all things turn out for the best for those whom God has chosen and who love him, and finally, I do know that Jesus will be at your side even in the bleakest times, even if you don’t recognize him. Could you have it any better than that?

And may the peace of God which passes all human understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.