

# THE HIGHEST FORM OF WORSHIP

Matthew 15:21-28

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost (Series A)

August 20, 2023

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 15, verses 21 through 28. In this gospel lesson, we see a woman who reveres Jesus and seeks mercy from him. And this is the highest worship she can render to him. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Matthew 15, beginning at verse 21, we read in Jesus' name.

<sup>21</sup> And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. <sup>22</sup> And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon." <sup>23</sup> But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, "Send her away, for she is crying out after us." <sup>24</sup> He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." <sup>25</sup> But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." <sup>26</sup> And he answered, "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." <sup>27</sup> She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." <sup>28</sup> Then Jesus answered her, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was healed instantly.

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

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This is one of those scripture lessons that, at first, is rather difficult. At first glance, Jesus comes across as uncaring, or even bigoted. A woman comes to him, begging for mercy for her daughter. Her daughter was oppressed by a demon. This isn't simply a physical illness. In the Bible, we often see physical effects to demonic oppression, but it was more than merely physical. The infirmity was spiritual. That makes it all the more severe. It affected her body and her soul, and there was nothing doctors could do to heal her. Only God could heal her. So the woman comes to Jesus, begging for his mercy.

And Jesus' response might shock us. It might make us disappointed in our Lord. We might think, *Jesus, I expected better from you*. At first, he refuses to help her, because she was not a Jew. Jesus and his disciples were in the district of Tyre and Sidon (15:21). This was a Gentile region north of Israel. It seems that Jesus went up there to get a little bit of a break from his work in Israel. Or maybe there was another reason. Maybe Jesus intended to meet this woman.

The woman was a Canaanite, but she confessed Jesus to be the Lord and the Son of David, that is, the Jewish Messiah (15:22). But Jesus responds very coldly: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (15:24). But the woman insisted. She knelt before him and asked again. But Jesus' response sounds rather bigoted or, dare I say it, racist: "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs" (15:26). Jesus just called this woman, her daughter, and her people "dogs." This is the sort of thing that gets you cancelled.

So it makes us uncomfortable; it's supposed to. But was Jesus really being a bigot? Was he being racist? When we sit with this story for a little while, we realize that Jesus was fishing for something. In the end, he did heal the girl. So did the woman change Jesus' mind? Or did Jesus

know all along what was going to happen? Yeah; Jesus knew. He was drawing out a response of faith from her. When Jesus implied that she was a dog, she said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table” (15:27). This is one of the greatest confessions of faith you will ever find. She accepts Jesus’ designation for her. She’s okay with being called a dog, as long as she gets to be Jesus’ dog. She confesses that Jesus’ crumbs are enough for her and her demon-oppressed daughter.

It’s an amazing confession of faith. And Jesus knew that she possessed this faith. He knew exactly how it was going to go. So he draws out this confession of faith. And, in the end, we all see that this woman is not a dog, nor is her daughter, but they are Jesus’ beloved children. And her confession of faith is preserved for thousands of years to commend her and, especially, her Lord Jesus Christ.

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This is a beautiful picture of worship. A couple weeks ago, when we started this series on worship, I said that nearly every Bible passage, and especially gospel lessons, teach us about worship. Because worship is simply about how God interacts with sinful people when we come into his presence. And we see this all throughout the Bible, and especially in the ministry of Jesus. So I hope we will see that what happens when we come to Jesus in worship is the same sort of thing that happened when this woman came to Jesus for mercy.

Two Sundays ago we talked about the nature of worship, specifically, that in worship, God is present among us, and he serves us his gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation. Worship is not so much about us offering our praises, to God. It is more about God forgiving our sins and granting us everlasting salvation. So worship is repentance. That’s a very simple way to define it. Christian worship is repentance.

What do we do when we come to God in worship? What should we do? We should come confessing our sins and seeking forgiveness. That is really the highest praise we can offer to God.

Everything we do, and the way we do it, confesses something. How we worship and what we do in worship reveals what we believe about God. So think about this with me: If we think that worship is about us offering our praises to God, what does that reveal about our faith? If we think that worship is about what we do for God, what does that reveal about what we actually believe about God? It makes God look needy, like he’s not happy until we praise him adequately. If we think that the main point of worship is to praise God and tell him how great he is, if that’s what we think God wants from this, then God must be, emotionally, kind of needy.

Now, we do praise God, and it’s right to do so, but not because God needs it, and it is not the highest form of worship. But if we come, confessing our sins and seeking forgiveness, what does that confess about God? Well, it confesses that he is gracious and merciful. It confesses that he is loving. It confesses that he is the supreme authority in the universe, because it is him we have to seek forgiveness from. It reveals that we expect to receive forgiveness from him. That is the highest form of worship. We worship God when we pray to him and ask him for help in every time of need.

Imagine you have little kids, but they never ask you for anything. Suppose they fall and skin their knee, but they don’t run to you. Suppose they’re hungry, but they don’t ask you for food. Suppose the batteries in their toys are dead, but they don’t ask you to change them. What would that mean? It would mean that they don’t expect to receive anything good from you. Now that would be far more painful than the constant annoyance of them asking for everything. So when they cry, and complain, and beg, they’re confessing their faith in their parents. They’re not

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thinking about it, of course, but they're acting on their beliefs. It's a natural confession of faith. They expect to receive good things.

So what do we really think about God? Do we call upon him in every time of need? I'm not just talking about Sunday morning worship now, but everyday life. Do we believe that God cares for us? And when we come into worship, do we expect God to be gracious to us? Do we expect that he will forgive our sins? The way we worship reveals the content of our faith. When we come seeking mercy, forgiveness, and eternal salvation, we are confessing that God is capable and loving enough to give it to us.

Our Lutheran Confessions use the example of a sinful woman who came to Jesus. It's not the same woman we read about today, but their approach to Jesus are similar. This woman wet Jesus' feet with her tears, wiped them with her hair, and anointed them with ointment (Luke 7:38). It's not like Jesus needed this. It might have even been uncomfortable. Commenting on this woman, our Lutheran Confessions say, "The woman came with the opinion that forgiveness of sins should be sought in Christ. This worship is the highest worship of Christ. She could think nothing greater about Christ. To seek forgiveness of sins from Him was truly to acknowledge the Messiah. To think of Christ this way, to worship Him this way, to embrace Him this way, is truly to believe" (*Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article V, 32*).

And all the people who come to Jesus seeking healing are not really asking for something different. It might seem different, but it's not. We get sick and die because of sin. To seek healing from Christ is to seek relief from the consequence of sin. So when Jesus healed people, he also forgave their sins, because that was the big deal. And the woman we read about today was not asking for something so much different than the forgiveness of sins. She asked Jesus to heal her daughter, who was oppressed by a demon. She asked Jesus to free her from death and the power of the devil. All of that is connected with the forgiveness of sins, because it is ultimately through forgiveness what we are freed from death and will receive the resurrection unto new life. When we seek forgiveness from Christ, we are also seeking eternal healing.

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This is the highest worship of Christ, and this principle shapes our order of worship. A good way to define worship is as repentance. Throughout the service, we go through repentance. We confess our sins, and we receive Christ's forgiveness.

So I want to walk through our service and show how the different parts teach the Christian faith and how they lead us in repentance. We'll do some of it this week, and some of it next week.

First, the invocation. The first words you hear on Sunday morning are this: "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." Why are those the first words? Part of it, honestly, is that you have to say something first. And most pastors or worship leaders, whether they think about it or not, start every service with the same words. It might be rather informal, like, "Good morning and welcome." And without even thinking about it, they will probably use the same words every single service, to the extent that if they have an evening service, they might still say, "Good morning." So what does it communicate if a pastor begins every service this way? It communicates that this guy hopes you're having a good morning and he's glad you're here. And, you know what? That's good. But what is the best thing we can say? In the last two thousand years, the best thing the Church has come up with is these words: "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." It identifies by whose authority this service is occurring. It is God's service. Everything in it is authorized by him, and it is his work. And you might recognize these words from the Bible. They come from Matthew 28, where Jesus

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commands his disciples make more disciples by “Baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19). So these words also remind us who we are. We are disciples of Jesus Christ and baptized children of our heavenly Father. So the invocation signals that we come into God’s service as his baptized children.

This might not be the first impression we get from the invocation. I think the first impression we get from it is a sense of formality. And newer forms of worship don’t really like formality. The church growth gurus would tell us that formality is off-putting. They say that we should make people feel comfortable in church.

Now, we certainly want people to feel welcome, but comfortable? That might not be the best goal. When an outsider comes into our service, they should get the impression that God is here. Or, if they’re an unbeliever, they should certainly get the impression that we believe God is here. If we treat worship like everything else, if we start with a joke or a happy song, does that communicate the presence of God?

Let me ask you this: Is God here? I’m not talking about pretending that God is here. I mean, is God actually here? And if he is, how should that affect our attitude when we walk into this place. If Jesus came and stood among us in bodily form, or if a cloud descended and filled this room, how would we react? Would we be casual or reverent?

God is here. And he is here in a special way. I have sometimes heard people say that there’s nothing special about a church building, because God is everywhere. And I accepted that. But when you take a good look at worship, and what actually happens during worship, and who is actually present, we really shouldn’t say that. This place is different than ordinary places. It’s not that the material of the walls and the pews is of a different nature than your walls and sofas at home. But it’s what happens here that sets it apart. God is here to serve us with his gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation.

It is, of course, true that Jesus is everywhere. That’s the nature of God. But he is here in a different way than he is in other places, and the reason is that we are gathered around his Word and Sacraments. That’s what it means to be gathered in Jesus’ name. And Jesus promised that where two or three are gathered in his name, there he is among us (Matt. 18:20). He is present everywhere, but there is a special, gracious presence when we are gathered in his name. It’s different from when you go fishing with a couple of friends. If you and your friends read the Bible and pray out on the water, then Jesus is present there in a similar way. But there’s still something different about being gathered in a place that is only used for God’s service. It’s even different than if you’re watching the livestream at home, because we are physical beings. God made us this way. There is something different and special about being gathered in one place to hear the Word of God and receive his Sacraments.

So we treat this place as holy, because we have set it apart for this unique and singular purpose. And when God serves us with his Word and Sacraments, he is present in a way that is not equaled at any other moment. Even when we come into this room for an ordinary purpose, maybe we’re coming to clean or decorate, we might still feel that reverence, and we should. Even in other, secular places, we often practice reverence because of what has happened in a certain place. If you visit Gettysburg, you probably have a reverence for that place. I remember visiting Waterloo as a kid when we lived in Europe, and hiking up that big earthen monument. There’s a certain reverence we have in places because of what has happened there. We might even demonstrate some of that reverence in sports stadiums, which might reveal who we really worship. And if we demonstrate reverence in those places, how much more should we practice reverence in the place where God visits us through his Word and Sacraments? It’s not because of

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the wood or architecture. It's because of what God does here. The architecture and our attitudes should correspond to what God does here. God's activity is primary. It shapes our liturgy, and it should shape our attitudes. So we begin, especially, with reverence.

After the invocation we have a psalm. We immediately hear the Word of God. And the Psalm often introduces the theme for the day. It might also be a call to worship or a call to repentance. Next week we'll talk more about the centrality of Word in worship.

After the psalm, we have an opening prayer. And we usually use the same prayer every week. When I started as a pastor, I was more inclined to rotate different prayers in that spot. I thought, *If we pray the same thing every week, people are going to get bored with it.* But as I thought more about the prayer we use, I began to appreciate that it teaches us and reminds us every Sunday why we are here. We don't have to use this prayer, but it's a really good prayer. And the solution to boredom is not to change it, but to actually think about it. If something is worthy of our use every Sunday, then maybe there's something really good about it. We should pay more attention to it, not less. We should think about it and take it to heart. So look at the first page in your bulletin. We address God as "our Maker, Redeemer, and Comforter." This is the doctrine of the Trinity. It identifies the Father as our Maker, the Son as our Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit as our comforter. Then we state why we are gathered: to hear the Word of God. On communion, baptismal, or confirmation services, we also add a corresponding prayer. Then we ask God to do his work. We ask him to teach us repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. This is what the Holy Spirit does, through the preaching of the Word. As we pray it, it reminds us what we should expect in this service. Then we pray also that, through his Word, God would cause us to grow in grace and holiness. These are the things that God promises to do through his Word. And it is always right to pray for things we know are in God's will.

Then we have a hymn. And it's not always an upbeat and joyful hymn. That's the prevailing idea among many Christians. They want to make people feel happy and positive about being here. And sometimes we use a hymn of praise at the opening, but it's really more appropriate to have a hymn of praise at the end, when we thank God for the work he has done. If God is here, and if we come into his presence as guilty sinners, it's often times more appropriate to have a call to repentance, like "Come to Calvary's Holy Mountain" (#419), or a hymn that teaches the fear of God, like, "My God, How Wonderful thou Art" (#180), or, like we've done for three weeks now, "Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence" (#163). It's beautiful to use at the start of worship, because, both lyrically and musically, it communicates the holiness of God's presence. In the flesh of Jesus Christ, God came down to us. And he still remains among us, especially in worship. And we revere his presence. We even tremble in his presence. But we do not flee or hide, because he has come, not to smite us, but to save us. We are, by nature, children of darkness. And when the Light of the World comes, it is terrifying. It exposes everything around and even within us. But the light also cleanses and drives away the darkness of hell. It is fearful and gracious at the same time. At the church I attended while in seminary, we sang at the beginning of every service, "The Lord is in His holy temple, let all the earth keep silence before him" (#395). It focused our attention on the actual presence of God.

Then we confess our sins. And this will be a good place to end today. This is just about the first thing we should do when we come into God's presence. Our sin is our big problem, and we want to get right to the point. I did add a time of silence, or sometimes we recite the Ten Commandments to prepare our hearts. The Ten Commandments are, of course, very important, but we tend to use a time of silence more often, because, in our world, there is very little silence. During this time, you can meditate on the Ten Commandments. I hope you have them

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memorized. And examine your own life in light of the Ten Commandments. Where have you sinned against God or your neighbor?

Then we hear a promise from God's Word, calling us to confess our sins. We rotate between 1 John 1:8-9 or Isaiah 1:18. So we have a little bit of variety, but not much. I want these verses to be very fresh in your minds, so that when your conscience accuses you, you will immediately remember the promise of God, calling you to confession. God wants to forgive your sins. He is not reluctant. It is his great desire. And so, even before we confess our sins, we hear the promise of the Gospel. We are, naturally, afraid of confession. We naturally fear that if we admit our sinfulness, God will destroy us. Like our first parents in the garden, we want to hide. So the promise of God calls us out of hiding. We need not fear confession, but we should come with confidence in God's mercy, knowing that he has already promised to forgive.

Then we confess our sin. And we usually use the same words, because these words are very good. We can use other confessions, and occasionally we do. But every confession of sin should admit both aspects of sin. We should confess original sin, "that we are by nature sinful and unclean," and actual sin, "that we have sinned against [God] in thought, word, and deed." We're tempted to think only in terms of our actual sins. We think that it's really just the bad stuff we do that is the problem. But that's not true. All of those actual sins flow from our nature. If it was only our actual sins that are the problem, we could fix the problem by not sinning anymore. But if you have ever tried to do that, you know that you cannot. The problem is much deeper. It's not merely what we do, but it's who we are. Sin has become part of our fallen human nature. So we not only need forgiveness for what we do, but we also need forgiveness for who we are. We are, by nature, not right. And this is offensive to God. So we confess our original sin and our actual sins, and we "flee for refuge to God's infinite mercy."

Then we sing our plea for mercy. It's not a joyful tune, nor should it be. We call it the Kyrie, which is Latin for, "O Lord." And we ask each person of the Trinity for mercy.

And, of course, God forgives us. This is really the chief part of confession. Confession is not just self-deprecation, as if God will feel sorry for us if we rag on ourselves. God forgives us because it is his nature to be merciful, Jesus has atoned for our sins, and God has promised to forgive our sins. This forgiveness is absolute and certain. The technical term is "absolution." It's the promise or application of forgiveness. Forgiveness was accomplished at the cross. Jesus paid, in full, for every sin you ever have or ever will commit. It is all paid for. This forgiveness is applied to us in different ways throughout the service, and here it is applied in the absolution, when we say in the clearest terms possible, "Almighty God, our heavenly Father, has had mercy upon you and has given His only Son to die for you, and for His sake forgives you all your sins." Confession should never occur without absolution, because God has promised that, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

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And that's really what worship is about. If we boil it down to its concentrated form, it's this: confession and absolution. Or we can simply call it "repentance." We also praise God, as we should, but God's chief attribute is his love. He desires to give. More than anything, he desires to forgive sinners. That's what Jesus dying and rising is all about. And that's why the highest worship we can offer to God is to seek the forgiveness of sins. We come, seeking the very thing he desires to give us. We confess that we are sinners, and, most importantly, we confess that he is a gracious and merciful God, who is both capable and willing to forgive us. We are forgiven, and God is pleased. Amen.

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.