

“¡Amigo!”

A Sermon for the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, August 20, 2017

Text: Matthew 15:21-28

I did a little begging last week, and I got more than I asked for.

As you know, I spent last week in the Dominican Republic with a Habitat for Humanity team. We worked on a few different projects, helping to build houses.

But I also did a little begging. I don't know if you would call it begging, but it felt like it to me.

Saturday evening I had one last thing to take care of before we left the capital, Santo Domingo. I had to go find a street vendor, an old man from whom I had purchased a few necklaces for Christine. After I purchased the necklaces I went on to buy something else from him, and I forgot about the necklaces. I left that bag sitting on his cart, and went back to the hotel we were at.

The group spent the day elsewhere, and I didn't have a chance to go back and try to recover the necklaces until the evening.

As I walked up the street full of shops and carts, I worked on what to say. I do not know Spanish, so my options were fairly limited. I could show him my other purchase, and hope that he remembered me. But I was not hopeful. It wasn't his fault I had set them down. He might have seen plenty of customers. Since I had no more pesos, though, I was determined to insist on my right to have two necklaces from him. I would be firm. But pleasant. I just didn't know how to explain, so I would have to rely heavily on him. I was a little anxious, I admit.

I found the cart, and the vendor showed no sign of recognizing me. I pulled out the other purchase from the bag and showed it to him. Still no recognition. I held up two fingers. All of a sudden he cried

“Amigo!” and reached behind his cart to pull out my bag with the two necklaces. He couldn't have been nicer about it. He seemed as happy that I had returned, as I was to recover my lost goods. He knew I wouldn't understand anything else, but he could tell I understood the word “Amigo,” so he kept saying it and shaking my hand.

I was delighted, of course, but I went to the hotel mainly pleased because I had been so wrong. I had thought this would be difficult and maybe unpleasant. Instead, it had turned into one of the best experiences of the week. I had planned to try to argue with him, but he had been completely . . . “merciful” to me.

The woman in our story was in a somewhat similar position. I don't know if there was a language barrier, but she knew she wanted something from Jesus, and she knew he could give it to her, and she was not going to take “no” for an answer. She came and knelt before Jesus, saying, “Lord, help me.” Not “Lord, have mercy,” as some people used to say to Jesus, but simply “Lord, help me.”

Jesus exacerbated the situation first, before he helped her. He emphasized, for the sake of the disciples, that he was only required to help the people he was sent to help. In other words, he made it ultra-clear that if he did help her it would not because he was supposed to.

That is extremely important to note, because of one thing. The quality of mercy is not strained, as Shakespeare once said. Mercy cannot be something forced. And what the woman was asking for was not

that Jesus would do his “job,” but that Jesus would show mercy.

So she responded by drawing a picture which made clear that she was only asking for unmerited help, not for something she deserved.

And in return, she got more than she could have asked for. Jesus praised her faith!

As I review my little experience, and compare it to hers, I notice that I was thinking the entire time about deserving. I knew what I was entitled to. I wanted what I had coming. And I’m sure the vendor was also concerned about fairness, equity. He didn’t want to deprive me of what I paid for.

But when he said “Amigo,” he was stepping out of that. Going beyond what was deserved. He could have just given me the necklace and rued the fact that he had lost out on some lucky profit. In fact, earlier that morning when I had made my purchases and we were walking away, I remarked to Scott “He had a good morning,” because I thought I had somewhat overpaid him. That evening, I was ashamed of that sentiment. What had made his day, too, was not the little money he got for necklaces. It was the sign of peace between us, as we said to one another, “Amigo!”

Jesus’ dialogue with the Canaanite woman was intended as a lesson to his disciples. Remember, these are the disciples who sometimes competed to be the “best” or “favorite” disciple. Yet to none of them did Jesus ever say “Great is your faith!” No, to them he was always saying “How little is your faith!” But to the woman who simply asked for help even when she was afraid she might not qualify for help, to that woman Jesus said “Great is your faith!”

In Luke 18:18, Jesus poses the rhetorical question “And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” He has just told a parable about

another woman who kept asking and asking for help, and finally got it. It is quite a close parallel to this one. And in both cases, the point of the story is faith.

Faith is not an admirable quality in us. We do not say about a person of faith “What a fine person!” In fact, people of great faith tend to be invisible to us. Like the Canaanite woman whose life was completely out of joint because her daughter was possessed by a demon, and she hadn’t been able to get help anywhere. To her neighbors, and to Jesus’ disciples, she was probably a nuisance. Her problems were too big.

And yet, she was a person whose faith was remarkable! Why? As I said, faith is not a quality in us. Rather, faith is what you call it when we avail ourselves of a quality in God. God’s grace and mercy.

Let me put it another way. We do not qualify for God’s love by being from a certain place, or a certain color, or by having certain virtues or attainments to point to. I do not qualify for anything from God, for example, by going to Dominican Republic and working hard. No, the gifts of love we share with others are the fruit of our response when God surprises us by calling us “Amigo.”

I really thought the vendor would see me in an adversarial way. All too often we treat God that way, too. We think God expects this or that from us, and we must meet with God’s approval before we can ask for God’s blessing. We have it completely backward. All God asks, from any and all of us, is to receive what he has saved for us—gifts of peace and wholeness and love which we have never purchased, but which he has purchased for us. We are his amigos, if we will simply receive it. When we do, there will be much joy, and love will flow. Amen.