

St. Paul's Anglican Church
The Second Sunday in Lent
March 17, 2019

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Our gospel for today, Matthew 15:21-28, is an intriguing story of a woman who approaches Jesus, seeking relief for her daughter who is besieged by a devil. His answers, on the surface, seem very strange, don't you think? and very unlike the caring Jesus we think we know. But it turns out, we will not be disappointed in Him!

The story begins: **Jesus went thence and departed to the coasts of Tyre and Sidon.** Jesus has just finished an long exhausting debate with Pharisees who had come from Jerusalem to challenge him. He needed, perhaps, some "down time," as we would say today, and as Mark's gospel says, he entered into a house and would have no man know it. The area he went to was near the Phoenician seaport cities of Tyre and Sidon, north of Carmel, modern day Haifai. This was the area where the Canaanites had fought Israel over the centuries. It was pagan, enemy territory.

And behold a woman of Canaan came out of the same coasts and cried unto Him, saying, Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou son of David, my daughter is grievously vexed with a devil. This was a piteous cry, and yet, Jesus did not even respond to her. Note that she, though a hated Canaanite and pagan, acknowledges Him as the son of David, the Messiah, an acknowledgement that most Israelites did not and would not give Him. She begs for what He delights to give: identifying herself with her poor child's suffering, and asking for His mercy. In her humility she does not bring her child, nor ask Him to go to her. In this way she has nothing to say, but to spread her grief before Him, thinking that He, whose pity she has heard of, needs only to know, in order to cure. In her faith, she thinks that his power can heal from afar. What more could Jesus have desired? All the conditions which He usually required, humility, faith, were present in her. His mercy seems clean gone, and His compassion absent. A Christ silent to a sufferer's cry is a paradox, which would seem to contradict the entire gospel story! What are we to make of this?

Some have suggested that Jesus treated her this way in order to try her faith. To let her display the depth of her faith, through trial. He always knows what is in our hearts (and from thee no secrets are hid), and knew the strength of her faith. As it says in 1 Peter 1:7, "That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, might be found unto praise and honor and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ." Remember that God had tested Abraham, telling him to sacrifice his only son; that the angel had wrestled with Jacob. At this point, she could have said, this is the man people are so excited about? She could have turned away in sorrow and anger, but she didn't. Christ did not answer her, that she might show herself more earnest in prayer. Note, not every acceptable prayer is immediately answered prayer. Sometimes God seems not to regard our prayers; we must redouble prayer through faith.

And his disciples came and besought him, saying: Send her away, for she cries after us. Again, this sounds cruel, except that they must have meant, send her away with a cure. Not because they cared about her, rather they just wanted to get rid of this screaming nuisance.

I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Jesus explains by putting his emphasis on two things: His total subordination to the divine will of the Father (we recall: do you not know I am about my Father's work? Jesus had said to his parents). There were restrictions imposed on the scope of his work. As the Savior and Redeemer, He was sent to make satisfaction and atonement for the sins of all God's elect, and to obtain eternal redemption and salvation for all people, whether Jews or Gentiles. But as a prophet and in satisfaction of the OT prophets, in the discharge of his own personal ministry, he was sent by his Father only to the Jews; He was the "minister of the circumcision," (Romans 15:8). He was sent only to preach the Gospel to them, and to work miracles among them, in proof of his Messiahship; and upon their rejection of Him, then his apostles were to be sent among the gentiles; but He himself was sent only to the Jews, here styled as the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Isaiah 53:6). Jesus had to fulfill the Law and Prophets through the people of Israel. And His time was short; He must concentrate obediently on his Father's mission. Had he not warned the disciples when he sent them out to minister and heal in Matt. 10:5-6: "Go not into the way of the gentiles... but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel"?

This argument, spoken to the disciples and not to her, could easily have sent her away in misery, were it not for her great faith. **Then came she and worshipped Him, Saying Lord, help me.** She follows them, and falls at His feet, and with "beautiful shamelessness" as St. Chrysostom calls it, repeats her prayer, but this time with pathetic brevity, uttering only, Lord help me. Note that she continued to pray and improved her prayer. Instead of blaming Him, or charging Him with unkindness, she fears that in her first utterance she had not been humble and reverent enough, and now she came and worshipped him and paid him more respect. She fears she has not been earnest enough, and she cries: Lord help me. When the answers of prayer seem deferred, God is teaching us to pray more and pray better.

The response is again a refusal which sounds harsh and hopeless. **"It is not meet (appropriate) to take the children's bread, and to cast it to the dogs."** It would seem that her distress touched no chord of sympathy. From lips accustomed to drop oil and wine into every wound, came words like swords, cold, unfeeling, and meant to tear apart. This refusal was a real refusal, founded on divine decree, which He was bound to obey. His words to her, harsh as they sound, are but another way of putting the limitation on which He had just insisted in His answer to the disciples. The "bread" is the blessing which He, as the sent one of God, brings; the "children" are the "lost sheep of Israel;" the "dogs" are the gentile world, so called by the Jews in a way of contempt, because of the gentiles' ignorance, idolatry, and impurity. Special blessings and church privileges are the children's bread, and must not be recklessly handed out to the ignorant and profane. Common charity must be extended to all, but spiritual dignities are for the household of faith, and giving them out without distinction, wastes the children's bread. Jesus said in Matt. 7:6: "Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye pearls before swine."

The meaning is simply the necessary restriction of His personal activity to the chosen nation. It is not meant to wound or insult, though, no doubt, it is cast in a form which might have been offensive, and would have repelled a less determined or less sorrowful, or less faithful heart. A less faithful heart.

Here is the strength of her faith and resolution, in breaking through all these discouragements. She might have sunk into silence, or broken out in anger. She might have said: This Jesus is no comfort, I might as well have stayed at home, as to have come here to be taunted and abused, not only to have a case slighted, but to be called a dog? A proud, unhumbled heart would not have stood for it. Is this the son of David? She might have said. Is this he that has such a reputation for kindness and compassion? I am not a dog, I am a woman, and an honest woman, and in misery, and I am sure it is not meet to call me a dog. AND yet, no, there is none of this. None. We have a humble, believing soul that truly believes in the Christ, takes everything to heart that he says and puts the best construction on it.

And she saith, truth Lord. She owns all that he says to be true. Truth Lord, I cannot deny it; I am a dog and have no right to the children's bread. King David, thou hast done very foolishly in taking another man's wife. Truth Lord. Paul, thou hast been the chief of sinners, art less than the least of saints, not meet to be called an apostle. Truth Lord. Recall our prayer of Humble Access in Communion: "We do not presume to come to this thy table, O merciful God, trusting in our own righteousness but in thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table."

She says: **Yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their master's table.** Here the woman wisely lays hold on and improves in a very beautiful manner, in her own favor, what seemed to be so much against her plea. Christ had used a diminutive for dogs which implied household pets, not fierce wild dogs. Thus the gentiles can be regarded as part of the family of God, lying await under the table to capture the precious blessings of God which the children, Israel, disdain. Of course, as in Romans 1:16, To the Jew first, and also to the Gentile. Out of Jesus' very words, she weaves a plea, Yes Lord, I am one of the dogs; then I am not an alien, but belong to your household. She accepts his analogy wholly and only asks him to carry out his own metaphor. She takes the sword from his hand, or as Luther so nicely put it, she catches him in His own words. She does not ask for a place at the table, nor to take anything from those who have a prior and more abundant claim to his mercies. A crumb alone is enough for her which they will never miss. In more theological words, she agrees in God's appointment which limits His initial mission to Israel, but she recognizes that all nations belong to God's household, and that she and the gentiles have a real, though for the time being inferior position in it. Note her faith encourages her to expect these crumbs as one of the family; which Christ of course knew he was leading her with his phraseology. He wanted to reward her great faith. Remember the humility and prayer of the prodigal son, "Father I have sinned against heaven, and am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants."

Then Jesus answered and said unto her, O woman, great is thy faith! Because she has shown herself through faith, humility, perseverance in prayer, swift perception of his meaning, ingenuity and boldness in her faith to be one of the true household of God, Christ joyfully recognizes here is a case in which he may pass beyond the limitations of his ministry, and in doing so does not exceed his commission from the Father. Such faith is entitled to the fullest share of his gift. She takes her place beside the centurion as the two gentile recipients of commendation from Him for the greatness of their faith. It had seemed as if He would give nothing; but He ends with giving all, and bidding her to take, not a mere crumb, but **"be it unto thee, even as thou wilt. And her daughter**

was made whole from that very hour.” Though the patient was at a distance, that was no hindrance to the efficacy of Christ’s word. He merely spoke, and it was done.

The gospel continues: Jesus returned to Galilee. Great multitudes came unto him, having with them the lame, blind, dumb, and maimed, and cast them down at Jesus’ feet, and he healed them. The irony here is how Jesus is treated in Israel and in Canaan. In Israel Jesus was trying to convince people He was the Messiah, and was constantly challenged to prove it, not by faith, but with a sign. Here in Gentile territory he met a woman convinced he was the Messiah and He could not discourage her efforts because of her faith. In Israel they are cast down at his feet, in hot haste with little ceremony, and it would appear, little prayer and petition for his healing power as the Messiah. The woman had not got her crumb without much pleading; the others get the bread almost without asking.

Here are two takeaways from this wonderful and powerful story.

Jesus had a mission from his Father – to bring the gospel to Israel -- and he followed it faithfully, even unto his death, while still rewarding the faith of true believers, though gentiles. Our mission is: Shema, Israel! Hear oh Israel! Love the Lord God with all our heart and soul and mind, and love our neighbors as ourselves. We cannot be perfect, but we can be imitators of Christ.

The second takeaway is to recognize the power of humble, earnest and unrelenting prayer, such as we have seen in the Canaanite woman. Let us pray unceasingly to our Creator and Father, for ourselves, for our neighbors, known and unknown, and especially for the unborn in the womb, our future, known by God in the womb before their birth, threatened by Satan and his devils led by those who would destroy human life in this fallen world. Amen.