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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY
Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 15A)
August 20, 2017
Text: Matthew 15:21–28 ¹

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

I'm not much for catchy sermon titles. But if I were to try to give this sermon a title, it might be something like, "A Pitiless Messiah" or "The Refining Fire of Silence." Like I said, I'm not too good at such things.

But today's text from Matthew 15:21–28 is a beautiful and powerful Gospel lesson. It teaches us about "faith's life and death struggle before God. From (this lesson) we are to learn that nothing, not even the throes of death, must deter us from calling upon God in prayer—even though he has already said, 'No'" (p. 321).

That's the kind of struggle the Canaanite woman in today's reading had with Jesus; a life and death struggle before God! Everything stood against this woman. Her nationality – she's a Canaanite, one of Israel's historic enemies; a Gentile with no right to implore help from Israel's Savior. Her sex stands against her – she's a woman who isn't supposed to be talking to men, especially Jewish men, in public.

Matthew emphasizes how strange this situation is by using the word "Behold" in vs. 22, "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.'" Pay attention! This Canaanite woman (an enemy of the Jews) is calling upon Jesus (a Jew) for help, asking mercy for her daughter. We aren't given any more details except that this woman's daughter is oppressed by a demon.

But this woman "blinds her eyes and shut her mind to the fact that she is a heathen, a Gentile, and he a Jew. Her heart is so full of trust in Christ that she is convinced, he will not turn me away" (p. 322). And so this faithful mother comes to Jesus, begging Him for mercy, calling Him "Lord, Son of David." That's the way Jews talked about

¹ All references in this sermon are taken from Martin Luther's 1534 sermon for the Second Sunday in Lent. The pagination refers to Complete Sermons of Martin Luther, Volume 5, published by Baker Books. Thanks be to God for our fathers in the faith.

the Messiah. It's almost the same as the disciples' confession in the boat on the Sea of Galilee that Jesus is the Son of God! (Matt. 14:33)

If there were ever a scenario we would expect Jesus to act mightily and powerfully in answering a prayer, this would be it! A faithful woman comes to Jesus, calling upon Him with all the right titles – Lord, Son of David – to grant deliverance from a demon. It's a perfect set-up. But what does Jesus actually do? Vs. 23, “But he (i.e., Jesus) did not answer her a word.” Stone, cold silence. He ignores her, acts like she isn't there. The Canaanite woman comes to Jesus in her most desperate hour of need. How could Jesus ignore such a situation?

The disciples are getting pretty fed-up with all this. So, they want Jesus to get rid of her (vs. 23). Jesus; “she keeps crying out after us.” It doesn't seem to me that they are all that interested in helping this foreign woman or her daughter for that matter either.

Learn well, dear saints of God, what is recorded here for our instruction and admonition. This event in the life of our Lord was preserved by the Holy Spirit in order to “keep us from stumbling when the evil foe confronts us with the charge: You are no Christian; your prayers won't accomplish a thing. Don't pay attention to such things. But say rather, ‘I am a wicked sinner, I nonetheless know that my Lord Jesus is not a sinner and wicked, but forever righteous and gracious. Yes, the more sinful and wicked I perceive myself to be, the more passionately and earnestly will I call upon him and let nothing deter me... The Canaanite woman ... prayed and let nothing keep her from praying, nor will I. Where else can I look for help, but with God in heaven, for the sake of his dear Son and my Redeemer, Christ Jesus” (p. 323).

Finally, Jesus speaks, not to the woman but to the disciples. Vs. 24, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Martin Luther bluntly said in his 1534 sermon on this text, “Christ is nowhere pictured as pitiless as in this Gospel” (p. 324). He has ignored her. The disciples have tried to get rid of her. And now, Jesus basically says, “She's not my kind of people.” I'm a Jew sent for the Jews. Sorry, can't help you.

Rejection! Amazingly, the Canaanite woman falls before Jesus and says, “Lord, help me” (vs. 25). Try to imagine this scene. This desperate mother knows Jesus can deliver her daughter from a demon. Already, she has experienced the Lord's silent disregard, the disciples' impatient dismissal, and now the Lord's outright rejection. And her reaction to it all is to cling to Jesus all the more closely. She falls to His feet in worship and supplication. This is faith's life and death struggle with God!

And it's not over. Jesus answers her cry of faith and humble prostration with "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs" (vs. 26). Ouch! It's as if Jesus were saying, "You and your daughters are pagans; your daughter belongs to the devil. It isn't right to take the holy things that belong to God's children and throw them to the unclean dogs."

This lowest, most desperate moment becomes the greatest, most glorious triumph. This Gentile does something that the scribes and Pharisees could never do: catch Jesus in His own words. And believe me, dear saints of God, the Lord Jesus is glad to be caught. "Yes, Lord" she says – no argument about her lineage, no bristling come-back about her being an outsider, a Gentile with no standing before God. "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the masters' table" (vs. 27).

Wow! That's amazing. I can't help but step back and shake my head every time I read this text! "Faith takes Christ in his word, when he's angriest, and makes out of his cruel words a comforting inversion... You, Jesus, say that I am a dog. I ask no more than a dog's rights.... Give your children the bread and a place at the table; I do not wish that. Let me, merely like a dog, pick up the crumbs under the table, allowing me that which the children don't need or even miss, the crumbs, and I will be content. So she catches Christ, the Lord, in his own words and with that wins not only the right of a dog, but also that of the children... He let himself be made captive, and must comply. Be sure of this: that's what he most deeply desires" from us too (p. 325).

Even dogs must have masters. And Jesus, you are the master of this poor, miserable sinner who deserves Your rebukes, your insults, your sternest judgments. Be that as it may, you, Jesus are my Master. I will not turn aside though heaven and hell rage against me.

Can't you just imagine the beaming smile on Jesus' face as He says these next words in vs. 28, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And then Matthew says, "And her daughter was healed instantly." Faith! Trust! That's what brings joy and delight to our Lord.

This Canaanite woman is the shining example of faith which is to trust in our Lord's goodness and love even when it looks like He has turned His back on us. Biblical faith is trust and confidence in Jesus even when it seems such faith and confidence are misplaced. At times, this kind of faith expressed during the life and death struggle with God is misunderstood by other Christians. Did not the disciples try to get rid of

her? But this faith, this absolute trust in the Savior will not be deterred. This woman's faith was great because the object of her faith is great: Jesus, the divine Son of God; the Lord and master of children and dogs.

Have we not all experienced this kind of struggle with God? "We cry out woefully but he does not hear us, acts as though he doesn't know us, and lets us go on in our misery as though we had no God. But it won't go on like this forever; God will require us. Let us, therefore, never doubt that we have a 'Yes' in heaven, imbedded in the heart of our Lord Jesus Christ, and that in his time it will be revealed...The 'Yes' is deep in his heart, in keeping with Christ's promise 'And whatsoever you shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son' (Jn 14:13)" (p. 327).

Too often we want Jesus to be easy and predictable. Just say the right words, do the right things and Jesus will give us what we want when we want it. That's a vending machine kind of faith; put in the right amount of money, push the button of choice. And you get what you want almost instantly. But that's not true faith.

It's only at the end do we see why Jesus acted the way He did. He wanted to place this woman in such a situation "that her faith might be so evident...Her faith, now revealed, now brings her to such a state of grace, that she is no longer a dog or a Gentile, but is welcomed as a beloved daughter and a blessed woman" (p. 326).

Dear saints, we need to practice this kind of faith by not despising God's Word, but cling firmly to its promise, never doubting that our prayer will be heard, even though for a time God delays. This Canaanite woman teaches us not to let God's "yes", revealed in Christ Jesus be taken, from our hearts. Jesus will help. He is the only Master that can be trusted in life and death. (paraphrase of Luther, p. 327-328).

Father in heaven, grant us this kind of faith in Jesus "so that with our whole heart we firmly believe his Word and promises, and through Christ, with the Holy Spirit's help, are eternally saved. Amen" (p. 328).

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.