

Pastor Kenneth Mars

St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Reminiscere (Second Sunday in Lent)

February 25, 2018

Text: Matthew 15:21–28

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

The patriarch Jacob was a man with a huge problem. His older brother Esau was coming to meet him with 400 men. It looks as if Esau had *not* forgotten that Jacob had tricked their father Isaac into giving the blessing of the firstborn to Jacob. Esau was the oldest son; he should have received that blessing with its double monetary inheritance and leadership over the entire family.

It's been several decades since those dreadful events. Jacob is returning home, going back to Canaan. That's when Jacob hears Esau is on his way to meet them with 400 men. It looks a fight! Jacob takes precautions by sending rich gifts to Esau, maybe that will assuage his anger. After sending everyone and everything in his family on ahead, Jacob stays behind. He prays throughout the night. The Scriptures say that Jacob wrestled with a man until the breaking of the day (Gen. 32:24). This is a life and death struggle. Not with Esau but with God! Jacob wrestles with God, "I will not let you go until you bless me" (Gen. 32:26). And wonder of wonders, Jacob prevails. The struggle changed Jacob, however. For the man touched Jacob's hip socket and put it out of joint. From then on, he would walk with a limp. The Lord changed Jacob's name to Israel because – and this is a very key text – "you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed" (Gen. 32:28). Israel and Esau were reconciled the next day. Israel's life, however, would always remain difficult.

God's Word teaches us that we Christians are to strive with God. And, that we are to prevail! Jacob wrestled with. As did Job. Saul of Tarsus fought against God; he became the apostle Paul, missionary to the Gentiles. "Let us not deceive ourselves with a Christianity without a continual battle" (Walther, *Gospel Sermons*, v. 1, p. 168). Yes, dear saints. "The struggle with the flesh, the world, and the devil is difficult, (however) there is a struggle that is even more difficult, a battle in which the Christian can never stand, yet into which all Christians are at times more or less led. This is the struggle with God Himself. Our Gospel reading today deals with this amazing struggle. Let us therefore today become acquainted with this struggle" (Walther, *Gospel Sermons*, v. 1, p. 168–169).

A Canaanite woman came to Jesus from the region of Tyre and Sidon, that's the area northwest of Galilee. This is Gentile territory, filled with non-Jews and rampant paganism. This woman also has a life and death problem. Her daughter is demon possessed. You parents, can you imagine such horror! Your child is tormented day and night by a demon. Your home is deprived of peace and comfort. Instead, it's filled with evil, sorrow, and endless tears. What a terrible burden.

But this Canaanite woman has heard of Jesus. We don't know how. But she calls upon Jesus using language from the OT, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon" (vs. 22). Lord, Son of David is messianic talk. This outcast from the nation of Israel believes in Israel's Messiah! And here He is! In her area, the region northwest of Israel. Her prayers will finally be answered. In every situation before this, Jesus had answered the supplicant's prayers: the sick and oppressed around the Sea of Galilee (Matt. 14), a man with a withered hand (Matt. 12), a paralytic in Nazareth not to mention Jesus raising a girl from the dead in response to her father's prayers (Matt. 9), etc. Not once has Jesus refused to heal and deliver someone oppressed by sin, Satan, or disease...until now. "But he did not answer her a word" (vs. 23a). This woman's God is silent; Her Savior is indifferent to this poor woman's prayer.

Here dear saints, you have an example of how God struggles with His dear children. How He treats them as if they were not His children, as if He were not concerned about them. Even as if He were their enemy rather than their friend and savior (paraphrase of Walther, p. 171).

Have you not experienced this struggle though the many temporal distresses faced day after day? Sickness, the death of loved ones, the faithlessness of friends, financial setbacks, general anxiety over the situation in the world, sorrows, and misfortunes of all kinds. Does not God's Word clearly teach "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22) and "All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (II Tim. 3:12)?

And what about spiritual distresses? When God appears to be cold and indifferent, utterly deaf, to your prayers. As if the heavens above are made of bronze and the earth beneath is made of iron (Dt. 28:23). The saints of all ages have cried out, "How long O Lord!" David, the man after God's own heart (Acts 13:22), himself cried out in Psalm 13, "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?"

Jesus, the Son of David, the Savior of all nations seemed to forget this distressed Canaanite woman and her daughter. His face was hidden from them. Even after our Lord's disciples asked Him to send her away (vs. 23), Jesus responds with another rebuff, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (vs. 24). Jesus hasn't even given her the woman the dignity of speaking to her directly. The Lord to whom she turned in hope and confidence has turned His back. No words of comfort. Rejection. Silence. And the woman's daughter remains oppressed by a demon. Dear saints, this is a life and death struggle...with God! Do not be deceived into thinking that such a struggle is not part of the Christian's life of faith and obedience.

And yet there is more. Jacob struggled with God and prevailed. This Canaanite woman struggles with Jesus, the Lord and Son of David, and she prevails! She clings to Jesus in faith even when everything and everyone around her stood against her. She prevails through faith in Jesus. From the beginning of her encounter with Jesus, she cried out for mercy, not justice, not rights and obligations. Lord have mercy! You, Jesus have the ability to save my daughter for you are the Lord. You, Jesus, can help me for you are the Savior, the Son of David. And even when Jesus answered that He was only sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, she responded by a simple act of submission and faith. "But she came and knelt before him (that's the act of submission), saying, 'Lord, help me'" (vs. 25) (those are words of faith).

To this act of submission and faith, Jesus remains cold. He finally speaks to the woman, "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs" (vs. 26). At the darkest moment, the woman turns the tables on Jesus and prevails! Pay close attention dear saints. "Yes." Don't go any further. Yes, Jesus. You are right in all that you say. I am not worthy of your mercy, nor is my daughter. We are dogs who have no rights, no hope; nothing in us makes us worthy recipients of Your love, attention, beneficence, or mercy. Yes. I a poor, miserable sinner, confess unto you all my sins and iniquities with which I have ever offended you and justly deserve your present and eternal punishment. Do you not see dear saints of God that we struggle with God every Divine Service, with every prayer? Martin Luther teaches us in the catechism that when we pray, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" we are praying that God would break and hinder "every evil plan and purpose of the devil, the world, and our sinful nature, which do not want us to hallow God's name or let His kingdom come." Everything around us and in us wants to fight against God. And to all of this we say, "Yes. It's all true. I am a dog of a person. Not a saint, not a child."

But, "...even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table" (vs. 27). I'll take the crumbs Jesus. That will be enough for this poor, miserable sinner. Do you not see how this woman traps Jesus in His own words and prevails! Everything you say and do Jesus is right. About me, about my daughter, my family, my world, everything! It's all true. And I'll live by your mercy. Just a crumb's portion will be enough. And the Lord Jesus acknowledges that He has been conquered by her faith in His goodness. "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire. And her daughter was healed instantly" (vs. 28).

Saints of God, the Lord Jesus desires that we conquer Him in our day to day struggle. That's is why He died and shed His blood on Calvary's cross. He rose from the dead so that we might come to Him and receive not only the crumbs of His kingdom but the entire banquet feast. His body and blood given and shed for you. His life offered as a ransom for your eternal life. His virtue and goodness bestowed to you through the Holy Spirit. We Christians prevail, not when we cry for justice, but for mercy and grace and forgiveness. Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy. We prevail when we cling to Christ's Word in faith and never let go. Words like, "Whoever comes to Me I will never cast our (John 6:37) and "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked" (Ezekiel 33:11) and "Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" (Rom. 5:20). (Paraphrase of Walther, p. 174).

"God gladly lets Himself be conquered. He does not struggle against Christians in order to conquer but to be conquered by them" (Walther, Gospel Sermons, v. 1, p. 174). Do not be discouraged when the world, and everyone in the world, or even you own self, tell you that God is against you. Remain steadfast in your faith. Hold to the promises of God revealed in His holy Word. God is anything but indifferent. The cross of Jesus is the beacon proclaiming God's love, mercy, and intervention. Our Lord desires to be overcome. And by His grace and mercy and love, you shall hear, "you have striven with God and have prevailed. O Christian, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire."

✠ 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.