

Sermon Lent 2 2021

February 28, 2021

Matthew 15:21-28

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning we meditate on the Gospel Lesson, which was previously read.

I'm often struck by this passage of Scripture. On the one hand I'm struck by how Jesus acts in it. And I have to admit I sort of appreciate it. As I so often point out, we have this perspective of God and of Jesus as this mushy, gushy God whose love is correlatively as amorphous. What I mean is we sort of just picture Jesus as the epitome of a super nice guy. Are you worried about life? Don't be. Jesus is super-nice. Do you do bad things? Don't worry about repenting, Jesus just loves you for who you are.

But that's not what we see here. No. In fact, it's how Jesus acts here that draws out the other thing I'm struck by in this. And that's the desperation of this Canaanite woman. I think I've only become increasingly struck by this since I've become a parent. Think about her. Put yourself in her shoes. Here her child is very troubled. As she says, "severely oppressed by a demon." Now, we don't know exactly what is wrong. We don't know if the daughter just has a sort of medical condition that's severely affecting her—after all, there was a strong correlation between illness and demons in Jesus' time. Or maybe this daughter exhibits what we would now call mental illness—something I think could still have a correlation to the demonic even as we understand the chemical side of it. Or she could just outright be possessed. We don't know. But we know that this woman sees Jesus and recognizes that He is the One who can save her daughter, and so she pleads with Him to do so.

In fact, she cries out after Him. She cries out, **“Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon.”** And what does Jesus do? Nothing. Not a word. In fact, the disciples even ask Him to send her way. It seems like they're thinking like we do: just give her what she wants so we can be free from having to hear her and worry about her anymore. And Jesus tells them: **“I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”** He says, “I didn't come for her. I didn't come for the Canaanites. I came for the Jews. I came as the Messiah.” Of course, He knows ultimately what He's going to do. But still, put yourself in her shoes. Then look at what she does: **“she came and knelt before him, saying, ‘Lord, help me.’”** Now, it's

going to get worse, but for some reason this line always strikes me the hardest. I think it strikes me so because you see the desperation so clearly. She's fallen down before Him, she's worshipping Jesus, and all she can say is "help me." "I can't do it, but you can. Help me." And then Jesus calls her a dog. **"It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."**

Now, we know how the story is going to end. But I think it's worth pausing here for a moment. What do we do with Jesus here? You know, I started by saying that I sort of appreciate how Jesus acts because it's contrary to how we think of Him, and it's still true. But what do we do with this? This woman is so desperate and He's calling her a dog? How do we process that? Why could we appreciate that?

I think we can appreciate it because we've been there. Sure, we haven't literally kneeled before Jesus standing before us in His body and hearing Him call us dogs, but I'm guessing at one time or another we've all been there. We've all been there where we've hit our moments of desperation, maybe not our child being oppressed, but another loved one. Or maybe not an illness but a seemingly insurmountable circumstance; something where every avenue of hope is gone, and in that moment it feels like God is so clearly our only hope. Don't get me wrong God's always our only hope, but I think you know what I'm saying. And I'm guessing you all have had those times where you've been crushed like this, and you're calling out to Jesus and all you get is silence. Like the oxymoronic cliché says: deafening silence. It doesn't get more real than that in the faith does it? And as we look at God and how He does that, as we look to Jesus and this interaction, we say it looks bad.

In our modern parlance, the optics on this aren't so good. This is bad PR. This isn't how we would run the show. This seems inhumane. So, what do we do?

Well, on the one hand, of course, we finish the story here. We see how ultimately Jesus does help her. We see how He commends her faith and heals her daughter. And on the other hand, we look to who we know Jesus is. We look this merciful Lord who helps us by carrying our sin to the cross, rising again. Hopefully, you know that's always the default when we can't understand God. We look at Him in light of the cross, because that gives us the interpretation for all things. You probably get tired of hearing that, but it's true and we have to hear it over and over again. We have to understand that the cross tells us of Jesus' ultimate commitment to do whatever it takes that we would be drawn to Him and to His love.

When we see that love, then, that tells us that every action in some way is informed by that love. Every action, then, is done that He would help us. As Jesus treats this woman in this way it is help. We might say, “how so?” But it is. How so?

Well, I think in some ways we can't know for sure and won't. But one thing we can say is that when we hear our Lord telling us He works all things for our good, we can know that faith in Him is the greatest good. That means that when we are stripped of our hope in everything else, as hard as that is, that's good for us.

As this woman is pleading with Jesus, as she's begging and negotiating. Or to put it into the terms we see in the Old Testament lesson with Jacob, as she's wrestling with Jesus, everything else is stripped away but trusting in Jesus. She's forced to hold onto Him and nothing else. And just like Jacob, she's not letting Jesus go until He blesses her. And that's just what He wants.

And He wants that for you. When you suffer from the challenges of a total breakdown in our society because of a pandemic; when we have rioting in the streets and politicians all around who demonstrate only a willingness to serve themselves. When the whole thing looks like it's going to hell in a handbasket, Jesus wants you to cling to Him in the knowledge that He will bless you. He wants you to call Him on that, to hold Him to that promise that He will bless you. He wants you to grasp onto Him in that when absolutely everything else around you tells you it's not going to happen—when it feels like even He is telling you it's not going to happen. Why? Because Christians, that's faith. Faith is being certain what is hoped for and having the conviction of what is not seen. Faith is trusting that you have heard Jesus tell you He loves you and He will never leave you nor forsake you and that He will forgive your every last sin even though you don't deserve it. It's trusting all of that, when all else feels like that can't be true.

That's what God's doing sometimes to you. He's helping you that you would stop worrying about all the other things that aren't Him. Is this how He has to do it? Sometimes it is. And it helps us. And that's a part of what we see Him doing here to this woman that's helping her.

As I say that, thought, there's some help for us too. And that's that this interaction is a blessing for us in that we get to see the example of this woman's faith. So, look at that example. I love how she responds. She's knelt before Jesus and He's called her a dog, and she's so humble she doesn't care. Now, to give some context to this, she's acknowledging that the Messiah has been promised to the Jews. You see,

that's what Jesus was saying when He said that about being sent to the lost sheep of Israel. Of course, we see that the Gospel is for all peoples, but there's a unique promise given to the Jews that this Messiah will be given through them and first for them. Sadly, you see an ultimate rejection on the part of many, but that's the case. And she's OK with that. She's fine with being a dog, she's fine with whatever's left, "You're right, Lord, it's not appropriate that the kids don't eat, and the dogs do, but **even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.**"

Look at that example. There's the humility to not care what God calls her because in her faith, she knows that God is so big, so gracious, so abundant in His ability to give that even the crumbs are feast for us. If only we had that humility.

And so look at it as she does. Look at the gifts our Lord has given you. Look at the work of Jesus, how He has spoken that to you. You've heard it time and time again, it seems mundane, but think about the gravity of it. It gets so that it looks like crumbs, but it's not. You're likely sometimes immune to hearing it, hearing that absolution at the beginning of the service, but that's not crumbs. That's heaven and earth for you. You're likely sometimes immune to thinking about the Lord's Supper that way. Like it's just crumbs, but it's not.

I know we've mentioned this before, but if we gave away \$100 bills at the rail each week, we'd have no trouble getting people here. And this looks like crumbs compared to that, but it's not. It's the body and blood of this Jesus for you. And as you receive it in view of that, He says to you, "**Great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.**"

And as you think about that, think about how He brought you to that faith. He did it through the things that were hard. He did it through the times where it felt like your prayers fell on deaf ears. He did it through the times it felt like He thought you were a dog. But in the end, you clung to Him until He blessed you. In the end He helped you, He helped you and forgave you, He helped you to learn from the faithful like this woman. He helped you in a way that was hard at times, but it was grounded in the fullest depth of His love. That's how we can understand what He's doing here. We can understand that sometimes His treatment seems inhumane, but even His crumbs are more than sufficient help. They are a feast unto themselves. Thanks be to God. Amen.