

Sermon for September 7, 2014 – 13th Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 15:21-28 (NIV84)

Theme: Trust in Jesus.

- 1) *Even when He seems to ignore our cries.*
- 2) *Even when His answer seems harsh.*
- 3) *Because He is faithful to all His promises and loves our humble trust in His mercy.*

²¹ *Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon.* ²² *A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession."* ²³ *Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us."* ²⁴ *He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."* ²⁵ *The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said.* ²⁶ *He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs."* ²⁷ *"Yes, Lord," she said, "but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."* ²⁸ *Then Jesus answered, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed from that very hour.*

Over the course of my ministry, I have met people at wits' end – wondering if God really cares for them. Why? Because the LORD doesn't seem to answer their prayers. They plead and plead on behalf of someone who is sick or straying, and the situation does not seem to get any better. Why won't the LORD answer? Are they bothering Jesus? Should they stop praying? Is there something wrong – something they need to change or do? Why won't the Lord listen?

It is for times like these that, I believe, our text was written. The example of the Canaanite woman's faith is a wonderful model for us to emulate. But it is not only her faith that shines so brightly in our text, so does the Lord's mercy, in which the woman put her faith. This mercy and grace may exhibit itself in strange ways, but we can be sure it always flows from a heart of love - even when it may not seem like it.

With the evangelist Matthew as our guide, let us learn to: **Trust in Jesus.** *1) Even when He seems to ignore our cries, 2) even when His answer seems harsh, 3) Because He is faithful to all His promises and loves our humble trust in His mercy.*

Part One: *Even when He seems to ignore our cries.*

Our text begins: *Leaving that place*, [i.e. the place Jesus had a run-in with the Pharisees where they accused him of allowing his disciples to break the tradition of the elders, and where Jesus condemned the Pharisees of breaking God's law for the sake of their traditions] *Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon.*

The first thing to note is that Jesus *withdrew*, i.e. He wanted some alone time with his disciples – out of the public eye (cf. Mark 7:24). The region of Tyre and Sidon would have been a good place for Jesus to be unnoticed. The largely gentile population would not know the prophecies about the Messiah – like the Jewish regions would. This would give him a chance to teach his disciples unbothered.

But there was a problem: *A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession."*

If you were to read this text in Greek, you would notice a special emphasis given to the fact that this woman was a Canaanite. Do you remember who the Canaanites were? They were the people who lived in the land before the Jewish Exodus from Egypt. The LORD found the practices and beliefs of these people so horrendous, that He told the Jews to rid the land of them when they got there. The Jews of Jesus' day considered this race of people so vile, that they called them "wild dogs."

A Canaanite would be the last person you'd think would recognize Jesus. But, not only did she recognize him, she also believed him to be the Messiah! She calls Jesus her "Lord" and "the Son of David". The term "Son of David" is a very specific Jewish term for the Messiah, and stemmed from the promise God gave David concerning that great descendant of his, who would rule over his kingdom forever. God would be His Father, and He would be His Son. (cf. 2 Samuel 7:12-16) The fact that she used this title indicates that she knew Scripture.

Not only does she trust that Jesus is the Messiah prophesied about in Scripture, but she also trusts that the Lord will have mercy on both her and her daughter – even though she is a Canaanite. And why would Jesus help her? Because the Scriptures say that the Messiah's gracious, saving love will extend to all mankind.

I want to pause for a moment and reflect on this woman some more. Here she is – a gentile in a place far removed from all the happenings of Jesus' ministry, and yet she has already confessed greater insight into who Jesus is than all the Bible scholars and religious leaders of Israel. She seems to have a greater understanding of Jesus' mission than his own disciples! And what is more – not only does she possess knowledge, but also has genuine, humble faith.

But *Jesus did not answer a word*. When you read this account in the Gospel of Mark, you get the sense that this woman kept following Jesus – crying out after him. No matter where they went, she followed. She was making quite the scene, but Jesus remained silent—acting almost as if he didn't hear her.

Why was Jesus doing this? Just hearing the fact that her daughter was suffering makes our hearts bleed for this mother. Why was Jesus silent? He had his reasons – reasons we may never know or understand. But, Jesus' silence did not hinder this woman from crying out to him in faith. She was confident that He would hear her and that He would show her mercy and love. How did she know? The Holy Spirit – working through Holy Scripture – convinced her of these facts. This is why she continues pleading, even when Jesus is silent.

Brothers and sisters in Christ: are you also as convinced of Jesus' mercy and power to help as this woman was? Do you know the Scriptures well enough that you are also able to call Him "the Son of David" (understanding what that means) and to continue to call out for his mercy – even when He seems to ignore you? Oh, how easily we give up. How soon we forget the promises of Scripture that speak of our Savior's wonderful mercy and power.

This woman, however, shows us that we should always trust in Jesus – not only when He seems to ignore our cries, but even when his answer seems harsh.

Part Two: *Even when His answer seems harsh.*

We read: *So his disciples came to him and urged him, "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us."*

I don't think we should understand the disciples' words as if they were asking Jesus to dismiss the woman without granting her request. They wanted Jesus to help her – unfortunately for the wrong reasons. You

see, this woman was causing a scene. If Jesus came to this region to be inconspicuous – letting this woman constantly follow and cry after them prevented that from happening. “Just heal her and be done with it,” the disciples were probably thinking.

But Jesus knew that it was not quite that simple. He answered the disciples (in earshot of the woman), *“I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.”* Yes, Jesus is the Savior of the world, but his earthly ministry was to the Jews. *They* were God’s lost sheep – His straying people – that He promised to save. Now it is certainly true that Jesus helped and healed many Gentiles during his ministry, but all those instances were in Israel. Jesus was on the outskirts of Israel – possibly even in Gentile territory. If he started ministering to the Gentiles in Tyre and Sidon, the Jewish religious leaders would quickly point out that He must not be the Messiah, because the Messiah was to be sent to the Jews – not the Gentiles.

The woman heard this and understood – probably better than Jesus own disciples! But even this doesn’t deter her from her trust in her Messiah’s mercy. She doesn’t tell Jesus what He should do, rather, in an act of worship, she prostrates herself before Jesus and simply says: *“Lord, help me!”*

He replied, “It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs.”

Doesn’t your jaw want to drop at Jesus’ response? He just called the woman a dog! True: he did not call her “a wild dog” like the Pharisees would have done; instead, he uses a word meaning “pet dog”. But still: He calls her a dog. He says that she should not expect the same treatment from Him that the Jews could expect because of the Old Testament covenant God made with them. She was not a Jew and was therefore excluded from the promises God made in the Old Testament regarding Jesus’ earthly ministry.

Now let me ask you: what would you do if Jesus said this to you? Would you get offended? Would you tell Jesus that you are just as good as any Jew - and maybe even better because you know who He is and believe in Him? Would you say: “I deserve this, Lord”? Would you tell Jesus that He offended you and should apologize? Would you leave in a huff – thinking: “Good riddance to you, if you are going to be like that.” I know that my sinful nature would tempt me to think such thoughts. But such thinking is wrong.

No, look at the faith of this woman: The first thing she says is: *“Yes, Lord.”* In other words she is saying, “Yes, Lord, I am an undeserving dog. You are correct: I have no right to expect anything from you because I am a sinner who deserves nothing from you. You are correct: the Scriptures say that your earthly ministry is to be directed towards the Jews – and not Gentiles like me. They are the people of your covenant. They need you to feed them first with your Gospel and salvation.”

At the same time *“even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.”* What the woman confesses here is this: “Lord, even though your earthly ministry is for the Jews, I know that I belong to you and am loved – not because of any special covenant you made with my people, but because your grace lets me be in your house and under your table. I have no right to call myself your child the way the Jews do, but I know that, in your mercy, you will allow crumbs of grace and morsels of mercy to be given to me – an underserving dog whom you love according to your great kindness. This is why I kneel here begging, because your love is great and your mercy is renowned. I will continue to beg – like a dog at a dinner table - holding on to the promise of your grace towards all people, which your sacred Scriptures prophesied you to have.

Part Three: *Because He is faithful to all His promises and loves our humble trust in His mercy.*

And do you know what? This woman was exactly right regarding both Jesus' mission to the Jews and his mercy towards all people. She was right to confess her unworthiness, and even more right to trust in Christ's amazing, underserved mercy and love. She understood what the grace of God is all about!

God is faithful to all His promises. The Scriptures say: *"God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?"* (Num 23:19 NIV84) There may be times when it seems like God isn't going to keep his promise to listen and act according to His grace, but He always does – no matter how things seem. We don't have the mind of God. We don't know all the reasons why God does or does not do the things we ask for in prayer. Truth be told, we may never understand His reasons, because His wisdom and knowledge are beyond anything we could ever imagine.

But we can always trust his mercy, love and faithfulness. There is not a promise recorded in Scripture that He won't keep. And He loves it when we trust in his mercy and faithfulness.

This is why Jesus answered: *"Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed from that very hour.*

Brothers and sisters in Christ: because of sin, we are all underserving dogs. But God loves us anyway: so much so that He sent His Son to suffer and die for all our sins. So much so that He sent out His Holy Spirit to bring us to repentance and faith in Him through the Gospel. Learn from the account of the Cannanite woman to **Trust in Jesus** - even when He seems to ignore our cries, or His answer seems harsh. And why should we trust in Him? Because He is faithful to all His promises and loves our humble trust in His mercy. He will answer us according to His rich grace. Why? Because even though we are dogs, the Scriptures say that (regardless of race or nationality) He adopts every believer to be his dearly loved child through faith in His Son (cf. Galatians 6:26-27). Amen.