

Matthew 4:21-28
Reminiscere
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
March 13, 2022

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

Last week we learned to see our temptations to sin in light of Satan's tempting Christ in the wilderness. The Devil tempted Christ in the same ways the Devil tempts us, and the only weapon we have against Satan's attacks is the weapon Jesus used: the written Word of God. This morning we see our spiritual warfare in a different light, in a way you might not have considered much. Our battles are not always against the Devil, or against ourselves or other people.

Sometimes our battles are with God Himself. Just as in our Old Testament Lesson Jacob wrestled with God until the breaking of the day, so do we wrestle with the LORD. We struggle with God and then we hold Him to His Word, saying with Jacob: "I will not go until you bless me." That's why God changed Jacob's name to Israel: "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed." We struggle with God like Jacob did and the LORD blesses us because of it.

This morning's Gospel Lesson is all about struggling with God to receive a blessing. Jesus was in a Gentile land, the district of Tyre and Sidon. Today the city of Tyre is in Lebanon, north of Israel. It is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, settled by the Phoenicians, a sea-faring Canaanite tribe. According to Greek legend Tyre is also the birthplace of Europa, where the continent of Europe gets its name. Sidon was another Phoenician city, probably the oldest Phoenician seaport. It's name comes from Sidon, the oldest son of Canaan, who was the oldest son of Ham, the cursed son of Noah. Tyre and Sidon together were key to

Phoenician life and culture the way any port cities are to a sea-faring people. The gods Baal and Ashterah were worshiped there as they had been among all the Canaanites, and the openness to the sea meant the people mixed with other cultures and religions beyond the sea. In short, the district of Tyre and Sidon was filled with pagan Gentiles, non-Jews, and in Scripture Jews and Gentiles are not supposed to associate.

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.” This woman was a Canaanite, a non-Jew, a Gentile sinner. Jews were not to associate with the likes of her! Yet this woman had heard about Jesus, the Messiah of Israel. Word had spread that Jesus could heal the sick and cast out demons, and this woman trusts in His power to help all people, not just Jews. So she cries out to Jesus a cry of faith: “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David!” This Gentile woman recognizes who Jesus is and what He is able to do. Jesus is the Lord God of Israel, the messianic Davidic king, who has come to show mercy to the afflicted.

But Jesus did not answer her a word. You would think Jesus would commend this Gentile woman for her great faith, as He did with others who cried out to Him for mercy. Remember, for example, the blind man in the Gospel reading on Quinquagesima Sunday, who prayed almost the same prayer. But no. Jesus remains silent. Yet the woman keeps crying out to the point that the disciples begged Jesus to send her away. This lady’s cries for mercy became too much for the disciples! They knew Jesus could either help her, or He could tell her to go away, so why does Jesus let her keep going on like this? Jesus is battling with this woman. He is testing her faith. Jesus allows the Canaanite woman to keep fighting and crying out to Him, and his counter-attack is silence. Finally Jesus responds: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” That could have come across as a great blow to this woman of faith. She had heard about who Jesus is

and what He can do, and she trusts that Jesus can help her daughter. And then that crushing response. It's like Jesus is saying: "You are not worthy of me. I came to help my people, the Jews, not you foreigners." Whatever was implied in the silence of Jesus is made explicit in His response. Jesus would not help the woman because she is a Gentile.

But the Gentile woman simply does not stop. She endured our Lord's silence and she heard His rebuke, yet she continues trusting in what she has heard about this man. She trusts the Word of God and all those examples from the Old Testament scriptures where God helps Gentiles. Just think about the Gentiles included in Jesus's family tree. There was the Gentile prostitute, Rahab, who hid the Israelite spies in Jericho (Joshua 2). There was Ruth the Moabite, who said to her Israelite mother-in-law: "Your people shall be my people, and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16). And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, who was a Hittite, a Gentile sinner. The Old Testament is filled with examples and prophecies of God's work not only among the Jews, but among Gentiles as well. This Canaanite woman knows that even though she is a Gentile, the God of Israel can still help her.

Jesus answered the woman: "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." Our LORD came as the Messiah of Israel and his mission was first and foremost to His own people. But the Canaanite woman turns our LORD's words against Him in a most marvelous way. She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." Even the Gentiles can benefit from the Savior of Israel. And finally Jesus changes His tone. "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was released of the demon at that very hour. This Gentile woman fought with God, just as Jacob wrestled with the Lord, and like Jacob, she overcame Him and was blessed for it. In her

faith, this Gentile woman becomes an example to us of what faith looks like as it responds to what God throws our way.

So why didn't Jesus grant this woman's request right away? Why did He draw out the conflict and turn it into this uncomfortable situation where the disciples felt they needed to intervene, asking Jesus to send her away? Did Jesus change His mind because of this woman's cleverness? There are so many questions we could ask about our Gospel Lesson this morning. There are so many questions we could ask about God in our own lives. Why does God let us suffer? Why does it seem like God is not listening to us? Where is God when innocent people are attacked? The one thing we need to realize in this woman's battle with Jesus is that God does not struggle with Christians in order to conquer them; God struggles with Christians in order to be conquered by them. In many ways this is like a Father playing with his children, building up their strength and determination. Indeed, as the Book of Hebrews says: "the Lord disciplines the one He loves, and chastises every son whom He receives . . . For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it" (Heb 12:6; 11). Or in Revelation 3:19, where Jesus says: "Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent." When Jesus remains silent in the face of this woman's request, He is testing her faith. When Jesus tells the woman He only came for the lost sheep of the house of Israel and that it wouldn't be right to give dogs the children's food, He is disciplining her, teaching this woman to hold on ever more firmly to the words and promises of God.

And what does this Gentile woman do? She does exactly what we should do when we are tested. Besides persisting in her request, she takes what Jesus says and holds Him to it. Jesus says it would not be right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dog, so she responds that

even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table. She beats Him at His own game, so to speak. Yes, Jesus came as Savior of the Jews, but doesn't the Old Testament teach us that the Gentiles too will benefit from the Messiah of Israel? God had promised that in Abraham all the families of the earth would be blessed (Gen 12:3). Indeed, the Gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek (Rom 1:16). This woman knew God's Word and she trusted in the promise even when God seemed to contradict Himself. The LORD was testing her faith, and like metal that is refined in the fire, she came through even stronger. This woman wrestled with God and prevailed, and so she received a blessing.

In a similar way, our LORD Jesus Christ Himself would wrestle with God the Father. Jesus's prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, on the night He was betrayed, looks like such a battle. Jesus prayed: "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will." While dying upon the tree, Jesus cried out the words of Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest?" In Psalm 22, Jesus recalls God's faithfulness to Israel, yet it seems as though Jesus is not heard. He gives up His spirit and dies on the cross for the sins of the world. It appeared as though everything were hopeless, as though Jesus wrestled with God the Father and lost. But Psalm 22 continues: "For He has not despised or abhorred the affliction of the afflicted, and He has not hidden His face from Him, but Has heard, when He cried to Him." It didn't seem like it, but God the Father heard the cries of His Son and brought Him through death to life by raising Jesus from the dead.

Just like the Gentile woman who pleaded with Jesus, and just like Jesus who wrestled with God the Father, the battles we face are not always against ourselves, or against other people, or even against Satan and his demons. No, sometimes our battle is with God Himself. We know what God promises in His Word, but sometimes, many times, God's Word contradicts the reality we experience. We are promised life, yet we experience death. We expect the best, yet encounter the worst. We expect God to save us and then it feels like we are abandoned. And so like this Gentile woman and like Jesus, we hold God to His Word. We cling to God's universal promises, promises such as salvation for repentant sinners, salvation for those who confess their sins and trust that Jesus paid for their sins by dying on the cross and rising again from the dead. When our sins return to haunt us, we admit that we are sinners and we say to the LORD: "Yes, I am a sinner, but you said you came into this world for sinners." You promised: "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Matt 9:13). When we experience war and death all around us, we cry out to God for mercy. We remind God of His promise of forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. We wrestle with God, and by wrestling with God in this life, the LORD is strengthening our faith unto life everlasting. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. We stand for the Offertory.