

Matthew 15:21–28
Reminiscere (Lent II)
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
March 5, 2023

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 heard how the Devil tempts us, even as he tempted Jesus in the wilderness, and how by the grace of God and with God's Word we are able to overcome the attacks of the Evil One. This week, though, we consider what's happening when the testing comes not from the Devil but from God Himself. In the interaction between the Canaanite woman and Jesus, we see how Jesus sometimes interacts with His Christians to strengthen our faith and our trust in Him. In the midst of your struggles it might seem like God is ignoring you, or even rejecting you, but on the other side of the struggle you will see how the Lord has been testing your faith to strengthen it and to draw you closer to Himself.

The Canaanite woman in today's Gospel Lesson had heard the reports about Jesus, how he healed people and cast out demons. As a Gentile, she's one of the last people you would expect to seek out our Lord. Typically Jews had no dealings with Gentiles (Acts 10:28). God led the people into the promised land to take everything away from the Canaanites and to devote them to destruction (Deut 20:17), that is, to annihilate the Canaanites with their idols. God wanted to make absolutely sure the Israelites would be preserved from the Canaanite idols and from the horrendous practices associated with Canaanite idolatry, like fornication and child sacrifice.

Yet here we see a Canaanite woman crying out to the LORD of Israel for mercy, that her daughter might be delivered from an unclean, demonic spirit. This woman had already heard

about Jesus and believed He could help her, regardless of the fact that she was a Canaanite and He an Israelite. She cried out to Jesus using a title for the Messiah, the anointed one of Israel: “Son of David!” This Canaanite woman believed Jesus the Messiah could exorcize the demon from her daughter.

But Jesus did not answer her a word. He does not say to this Gentile woman what He earlier said to the Gentile centurion: “Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith” (Matt 8:10). Jesus does not immediately commend this woman’s faith or use her as an example for his disciples, at least not in the way we might expect. Instead, Jesus refuses to have an audience with her. He ignores this woman’s pleas for mercy and her cries for help.

Sometimes it might feel the same in your life, too. You cry out to the LORD for deliverance that doesn’t seem to come. You turn to the LORD, trusting His promise in Psalm 50[:15]: “Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.” Why doesn’t the LORD deliver us when we cry out to Him? Why does He seem slow in fulfilling His promises? Why does He seem to leave us alone in our suffering and misery? Why doesn’t the LORD seem to command His angels concerning *us*, to guard us in *all* our ways? Why does God seem silent to our cries for help, for ourselves and others? But He does not answer a word.

At this point, the Canaanite woman could have left Jesus alone, heeded His silence, and went her own way. She could have accepted fate and sought help somewhere else. Instead, she begs the disciples to have them take her case to the LORD. They, in turn, beg Jesus to send her away, which shows how insistent she must have been! This Canaanite woman is tenacious, demanding the help she knows Jesus is able to provide.

Finally our LORD answers the Canaanite woman, but in a way that should deflate her resolve, not increase it. Jesus says: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” In

the Old Testament, God's people are often referred to as sheep, as God's flock. The shepherds of Israel, the rulers of the people, neglected their duties. They were not strengthening the sheep, healing the sick, binding up the injured, bringing back the strayed, nor seeking the lost, but instead ruled over the flock with force and harshness (Ez 34:4). So the LORD promised that He Himself would be the Shepherd of His Sheep and raise up over them one shepherd, David, to feed them and be their shepherd (Ez 34:23). Jesus is the Good Shepherd (John 10:16), the Son of David, as even this Canaanite woman confesses. But He came first for the flock of Israel, and only then for those not yet of the flock, for the Gentiles (John 10:16; Rom 1:16).

Even that answer, though, does not deter the Canaanite woman. In spite of the rejection, she approaches our LORD, kneels before Him, and says: "Lord, help me." If at first you don't succeed, try, try again. Jesus's silence does not deter her, neither does His seemingly outright rejection. The woman continues seeking help from our LORD, trusting the reports she has heard about His power to heal and His mercy. Sometimes you, too, might feel rejected by our LORD, like He does not hear you or like He is actually making things more difficult. You might feel like you're not part of the flock or not worthy of our LORD's gifts. But it is precisely then that you should keep pressing hardest and say: "Lord, help me."

And still Jesus answers with yet an even harsher word: "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." Jesus is saying it's not right to take the blessings for the people of Israel and cast them before the Gentiles. There has to be a priority towards those of the household of faith. The Canaanite woman responds with the perfect comeback: "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." Here, the Canaanite woman confesses that yes, she is a dog, a Gentile sinner who does not deserve anything from the LORD.

But if God can take care of the very least and undeserving creatures, then He might just help her demon-oppressed daughter as well.

Finally Jesus answers her: “O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.” And her daughter was healed instantly. The woman finally receives in reality what before she could only grasp by faith. She trusted in the reports about Jesus in spite of all evidence to the contrary—in spite of our Lord’s silence and apparent rejection of her request. Instead of going her own way, she drew nearer to our Lord. She confessed that she is a dog, and in so doing she proved herself to be a child of God. She confessed Herself to be a Gentile sinner, yet in faith she was a true Israelite.

But why did Jesus hold out so long? Why not reward this woman’s faith immediately, and praise her as He did other Gentiles? What Jesus shows us here is that He will sometimes test our faith to strengthen it. Just as gold is refined by fire, so is our faith put through the fire of various trials, that it might come out even purer in the end (1 Peter 1:1–7). Or like a little flame that seems like the wind would snuff it out, when in reality the wind oftentimes gives the flame the oxygen needed to grow even more. As our LORD says in Isaiah 42[:3]: “a faintly burning wick He will not quench.” The LORD won’t snuff out our faith, even if it feels like that’s what’s happening. In reality, He’s throwing fuel on the fire. Our LORD remains silent or answers “No” not that we might flee elsewhere, but that we might draw closer to our LORD and to His purposes for us.

Jesus Himself, our High priest who is able to sympathize with all our weaknesses (Heb 4:15), experienced this same kind of testing from God the Father. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prays: “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will but as you will” (Matt 26:39). But it was the Lord’s will to crush Him (Is 53:10). Our Lord Jesus

Christ suffered and died alone, seemingly abandoned as He cried out those words from 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.” And yet in spite of it all He trusted that the LORD “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” (Ps 22:24).

When you feel like the LORD is far away from you, He is actually quite near (Acts 17:27). When it seems like He’s not listening, He hears every word and every groan too deep for words (Rom 8:26). The Father did not abandon His Son or let Him see corruption (Ps 16:10), but after three days raised Him from the dead. The Father doesn’t abandon you, either, but at the right time swiftly comes to save you and raise you up. Even death no longer has power over you. So when it seems like God is far away from you or isn’t listening to your pleas—when it feels like our Lord is rejecting you, remember this Canaanite woman. Cling to the Lord and hold Him to His Word. Draw near to His throne of grace with confidence, and you will receive grace and help in time of need (Heb 4:16). 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.