

Matthew 15:21–28
Reminiscere (Lent II)
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
February 24, 2024

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,

Sometimes we contend against the Devil, the world, and our sinful desires, and sometimes, we contend against God Himself. As baptized children of God, you, dear Christians, have been placed into a unique situation. Sometimes Satan appears to you as the enemy he truly is, trying everything in his power to deceive and destroy you. And sometimes he appears to you as an angel of light, as a friend only seeking to help you. Only with the Word of God are you able to distinguish the difference. And sometimes God appears to you as a friend of sinners, seeking to help you in time of need and rescue you out of danger. But sometimes, God can appear as though He's your enemy, as though He has abandoned you or turns the cold shoulder to you, refusing to help. Only with the Word of God are you able to distinguish the difference and realize that at times, God hides His face from you in love, that He might exercise and strengthen your faith in Him.

Our father, Jacob, wrestled the whole night with God in human form. He contended with God and man and prevailed, so the LORD changed Jacob's name to Israel. Jacob could have rolled over and submitted to the LORD. He could have given up, but he kept fighting. In the end, Jacob saw the LORD face to face and yet he lived. His life was delivered. A night of wrestling with the LORD ended in the LORD blessing Israel. God didn't fight with Jacob in order to overcome him, but to strengthen him and finally to bless him. When Christians struggle with God, the ultimate goal is resilience and the strengthening of our faith.

In our Gospel lesson this morning, we have another example of the LORD Jesus Christ wrestling with a believer for the sake of strengthening her faith. Jesus left his interaction with the Pharisees, where he explained that it's not what goes into a person that makes them unclean; it's what comes out of the sinful heart that defiles a person. Now, Jesus withdraws to a place filled with unclean Gentiles. Tyre and Sidon are former Canaanite cities, specifically the territory of the Phoenicians, or as they were once known, the Philistines. These are the people of Goliath. This is the territory of Israel's arch enemy, the source of much uncleanness in the history of Israel. Yet Jesus withdraws to that place. He makes it a place of retreat and shows already the implications of His work that is for all people, first for the Jews, but then also for the Gentiles.

Jesus retreats, as He often does, to get away from the crowds, to spend time in solitude and prayer. And then a Canaanite woman from the region comes to Him crying: "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon." This woman recognizes Jesus. The reports about the Savior of Israel had already traveled quite far. She was dealing with demonic oppression of her daughter, a rather common occurrence in the pagan world, then and now. But she heard how Jesus casts out demons, so she goes to Him for help. In fact, this Canaanite woman even recognizes that Jesus is the Son of David, a Messianic title. She doesn't just believe Him to be a miracle-worker or exorcist. She addresses him for who He truly is: David's son yet David's Lord.

But Jesus did not answer the Canaanite woman a word. He gave her the cold shoulder. For most people, this would immediately put a stop to their begging. If you seek help and a person ignores you, then you move on to some other source of help. Yet this Canaanite woman is persistent. So persistent that the disciples of Jesus come to our Lord, begging Him and saying: "Send her away, for she is crying out after us." The woman is so persistent she drives the

disciples to the point of desperation. They need Jesus to answer just to get this woman off their backs. This is like the persistent widow in Luke 18, who always prays and never loses heart. She keeps bothering the unrighteous judge until he relents. How much more ought we approach our LORD Jesus Christ, the righteous one?

But Jesus does not relent. He answers harshly: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” If the silence didn’t drive this woman away, surely this response would. Jesus admits He can do what she wants, it’s simply not for her. He was not sent primarily for the Canaanites or any other Gentiles, but for the Jews. Today, people would respond to a statement like this in anger. “That’s discrimination!” How could He show such favoritism? Well, it’s all part of the plan. Jesus has to focus on the people of Israel first and from them the message can go out into all the world. As the LORD promised Abraham: “In your seed will all the nations of the earth be blessed.” The promise is initially for the Jews, but in the end, the Gentiles are included. The mystery of Christ is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel (Eph 3:6). But for the time being this mystery remains hidden. Jesus conceals the full extent of His work.

He says no, so the woman kneels before Him, saying: “Lord, help me.” To this third act of desperation, Jesus responds with what should be the death blow to her request: “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said: “Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you” (Matt 7:6). This statement seems to take all hope away. Jesus refuses to give help to the unworthy. In fact, it would be dangerous to do so. Aiding the Gentile sinners would make Him complicit in their sins. And what’s more, they wouldn’t receive His help with thanksgiving but would turn to attack Him. To be clear, that is what ends up happening.

Jesus helps both Jew and Gentile and the response is that Jew and Gentile work together to nail Him to the cross. Jesus will die for trying to help sinners, and in doing so gives them the help they really need: the forgiveness of sins.

The Canaanite woman responds with that wise quip that brings us so much delight: “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” Yes, I’m a dog. I’m a Gentile sinner who is unworthy of the things of God. But a little crumb of mercy is all I ask for. I don’t want a place at the table. I just want a bite of what’s thrown out at the end. Oh to be even a doorkeeper in the house of my God (Ps 84:10), or a sparrow or swallow. Oh to be a fly on the wall, if only I can be in His presence! The Canaanite woman recognizes her unworthiness before the LORD. She confesses herself to be not a child but a dog. And then all at once our Lord’s attitude towards this woman seems to change. Jesus answered her: “O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.” And her daughter was healed instantly. Jesus knew all along how He would exercise this woman in her faith. Of course, He could have healed the daughter instantly, but He uses the opportunity to test her faith, to refine it as gold and burn off whatever dross there might be. In the end, the woman’s faith comes out stronger and purer. She confesses herself a dog and is then received as a child of God.

When God appears to be your enemy, or seems to turn the cold shoulder to you, when it seems like God has abandoned you, don’t give up. Press in even harder and realize that the LORD is testing you to strengthen your trust in Him. In a way this is like any discipline you undergo. Basic Training is successful because it is difficult. If you push yourself to the limit in weight training or running or any exercise of physical endurance, you will come out stronger. The difficulties and the hard times of the moment prepare you for something much better, and to realize this is often what it takes to get through the momentary affliction.

How much more so with the things of God? Peter says to rejoice that you are grieved for a little while by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ (1 Pet 1:6–7). And Hebrews 12:6 reminds us that the Lord disciplines those He loves. It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom His father does not discipline? 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.

Our Lord's silence and His seeming rejection and disdain for this Gentile woman are not to hurt her, but to strengthen her faith. That's what the Lord is doing in your life as well when it seems like He's not listening, or like He is rejecting you. Jesus could cry out on the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me?" But finally the LORD does hear His Son, and rescues Him from death. The affliction that is but for a moment is followed by the eternal glory of resurrection. So it goes with the children of God.

When it seems like God has rejected you, confess as does the Canaanite woman, who you truly are: a dog, a lost and condemned creature. Recognize your sinful condition, humble yourself before the LORD and He will exalt you at the proper time. Confess your unworthiness and the LORD will make you worthy. Confess that you are a dog, and the LORD will make of you His child.

Older versions of the Anglican Book of Common Prayer have a wonderful Communion prayer drawn from early church fathers and based on the confession of faith of this Canaanite woman, which is a prayer we can make our own before receiving the Lord's Supper. The Prayer of Humble Access, as it is called, goes like this: Let us pray. We do not presume to come to this

thy Table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table. But thou art the same Lord, whose property is always to have mercy: Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of thy dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body, and our souls washed through his most precious blood, and that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us. Amen.

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