

Sunday: Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Date: August 16, 2020

Text: Matthew 15:21-28

Title: In Silence, God is Working

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Please pray with me.

Jesus withdraws to the region of Tyre and Sidon for a respite. He had been verbally jousting with the Pharisees and scribes who had come from Jerusalem to challenge him. Jesus' detractors asked him, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat."

Jesus responded by posing a question to them that revealed their hypocrisy as they did not follow the commandments they used as their platform of authority. They did not honor father and mother as they amassed their riches while ignoring the needs of their parents.

Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah saying, "This people honors me with their lips, in vain do they worship me, teaching the doctrines the commandments of men" (Matthew 15:8-9, quoting Isaiah 29:13).

Jesus concludes his interaction with his opponents pointing out that it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person but what comes out of the heart that is the source of defilement.

Leaving them to consider his words, Jesus heads to the region of Tyre and Sidon. This is north of Israel in Jesus' day. Moving out of the region of Galilee he enters Canaanite country.

"Have mercy on me, O Lord . . ." a woman cries as he walks by. He does not respond.

Have mercy on me, O Lord . . ." No response

Have mercy on me, O, Lord . . ." Silence

Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David . . ." Nothing

"Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon." It is as if she did not exist. Jesus does not respond.

The woman calls out to Jesus repeatedly and gets no response. Have you ever felt this way? Have you called out to God only to be met with silence? Have you prayed to Jesus for a pressing need, only to experience “nothing” in reply? Have you kept pleading with our Lord for what you think should happen, only to see no evidence that you have been heard? Maybe it is a prayer for yourself; for healing, for peace, for greater understanding, for a job, for enough money to pay all the bills. Maybe it is a prayer for your child; for healing, for success in school, for a loving spouse, for a change in lifestyle. Or maybe it is a prayer for the world around us; for peace, for an end to violence, for people to come to know Jesus, for an end to the pandemic. And yet these noble petitions are left hanging. There is no response. Things don’t change. We can empathize with the Canaanite woman, can’t we?

Then there is a response to her pleas. Not from Jesus, but from the disciples. The disciples were affected by the persistence of the woman. Reminiscent of their attitude regarding the crowds when Jesus fed the 5000, they begged Jesus to send her away. She was really annoying evidently. “Send her away, for she is crying out after us” (Matthew 15:23).

Deflated by their opposition, the woman does not give up. Jesus now ignored the comments of the disciples and turned to the woman. He responded to her pleas, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

This woman, a Canaanite, was not part of the house of Israel. In fact, Canaanites were one of the pagan nations that were to be conquered and driven from the promised land following the Exodus and 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. Undeterred, the woman approached Jesus, knelt before him, and pleaded for help. “Lord, help me.” (Matthew 15:25).

This woman submits herself to the Master of Creation, recognizing his power and authority. She knew who this Jesus was. He was (is) the Messiah. Accurately identifying him as the Son of David, shows the revelation of his identity to her by the power of the Holy Spirit. For no one can say Jesus is Lord, unless it has been revealed to them by the power of the Holy Spirit. (1 Corinthians 12:3).

Jesus engages the woman saying, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs” (Matthew 15:26). Did Jesus just call this woman a dog? Does this statement equate all Canaanites with canines? Are all Gentiles outside the scope of Jesus’ mission of restoration of creation and bringing the world and all that is in it to a right relationship with God?

Jesus took on human flesh in order to reach out to the Children of Abraham. He was incarnate to fulfill the prophecies and promises of God found in the words of Scripture. Rejected by the religious leaders, Jesus finds faith outside the Children of Abraham. Jesus commends the faith of the Samaritan woman at the well, the centurion whose servant Jesus healed, and in our gospel reading today. In this desperate Canaanite woman, he finds great faith.

In the woman's reply, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table" (Matthew 15:27), Jesus hears a confession of trust in the Good News he has shared with the world.

If you think about it, these are words of amazing grace. Dogs, animals who are not invited to share in the feast at the table are nonetheless fed by the crumbs that fall from the table. They are sustained not by their own wiles or by their own actions. They are not given a place at the table where they have a plate and a helping of the prepared meal. They are fed and their life is supported by the crumbs that come from the hand of the master and they share in the food of life that is dropped by those rightly at the table.

Jesus, in his omniscience, sees the great faith this outsider had in him, and in who he was (is). The faith of this woman is not something that she created in herself. No one can come to faith except by the gift of grace. It is the Holy Spirit who creates faith in dead hearts. This Canaanite had no claim to the kingdom of God as an heir of Abraham. She was a member of a pagan nation and an idolatrous culture. Yet, God in his wisdom allowed the crumbs of grace to fall from the table to sustain her. The woman pleaded for mercy, which is something she had already been given. She was shown great mercy as God showered her with his precious gift of faith. She did not earn it. She did not create it. She was blessed with unmerited grace in God's wisdom.

Jesus commends her faith and blesses her with the very things she prayed for. He had mercy on her, and he healed her daughter from the affliction of the demon that possessed her. God, through Christ Jesus, feeds the outsiders, the non-Jews, the dogs, with the crumbs of his grace.

In this miracle, we once again see the power of Jesus as the incarnate Son of God to control the very world he created. He has power over everything in this world. He has control over the good things and the bad. He had and still has the power over the dark forces of Satan. Casting out the demon reminds us that while creation fell into corruption in the fall of our first parents into sin, God through his

only Son, still reigns over this world. He also shows us a vision of the new heaven and new earth that we will enjoy when Christ returns to judge all people, living and dead. We see that Satan has no power in the face of the almighty God.

The moments of silence experienced by the Canaanite woman were only a part of the story. Silence did not mean inaction on the part of God. As she was pleading for mercy from Jesus, she was receiving it. Not in a spoken word, but in the action of God. Her prayer for mercy was granted. She was shown mercy in the gift of grace poured into her heart by the Holy Spirit.

As we pour out our hearts to God and plead for his intervention, we may only perceive silence as God's response. Our Father is not indifferent to our plight. He is not ignoring us. He is aware of our needs and he meets our most pressing needs. Like the Canaanite woman, we do not see the gifts we are given when they do not appear to be a response to our request. Yet we are being blessed by the gifts of God.

In fact, the crumbs that fall from the table for the benefit of the dogs, still fall from the table for us today. We do not deserve the gifts we receive, but that does not stop our gracious God from blessing us. Christ is the centerpiece for our feast and the Lamb who was slain gives of Himself for our life.

What falls from the table of the Lord includes drops of water that coupled with the Word of God, become Holy Baptism. A cleansing flood, that washes away our sins and brings us into the kingdom of God. The Holy Spirit, pouring out the grace of God, into blackened, dead, corrupt hearts. The gift of faith is planted in our hearts. We are cleansed from all unrighteousness through this washing of regeneration. This is truly God showing us mercy as a free gift.

What falls from the table of the Lord includes the bread of life. The very body of Christ that we partake of in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. The body of Jesus given for us. The bread we share is truly the mercy of God being passed to us as we receive Christ for us.

What falls from the table of the Lord includes the cup of blessing. The true blood of Christ, in, with, and under the wine. It is Jesus' blood of the new covenant. The blood of the Lamb that was shed for you and for me for the forgiveness of our sins.

While we may perceive silence on the part of God in response to our pleas, he is, in fact, pouring out his blessings on us. He is sustaining us to life everlasting.

He is granting our prayer for mercy abundantly. Our loving Father does not always give us what we want, but he always gives us what we need. He gives us Jesus.

We are born outsiders to the kingdom of heaven, but God has shared his abundant gifts of grace and mercy, crumbs from heaven, you might say, to draw us into his kingdom and to life everlasting. Through Jesus we are brought to the table and given a seat at the marriage feast of the Lamb. No longer a dog, but a saint dressed in the robe of Christ's righteousness.

In Jesus' name.

Amen.