

The Second Sunday in Lent
St. Matthew 15:21-28: "The Merciful Lord Hears You."
February 27/28, 2021 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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Jesus, our Savior divine, how can we ever thank You for bringing us to the true and saving faith! Help us never to doubt but firmly to believe, no matter how great our trials or how distant Your help may appear. Grant us true humility, asking nothing because of any merit or worthiness on our part, but trusting only in Your Word and promise. Whether in joy or sorrow, teach us to believe and to say that You have done all things well. Amen. (*Meditations on the Gospels*, p. 301)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the fifteenth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. 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." / But He did not answer her a word. And His disciples came and begged Him, saying, "Send her away, for she is crying out after us." / He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." / But she came and knelt before Him, saying, "Lord, help me." / And He answered, "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." / She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." / Then Jesus answered her, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was healed instantly. ^(ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Joh. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, who promises to show mercy and grace to all who ask, seek, and knock in His name (Mat. 7:7), dear fellow redeemed:

What do you value more: someone who is a good listener, or someone who is a good talker? Good talkers have their place, but we especially appreciate good listeners. It is important to us that we are heard. We all have needs that we want others to know about. We all have opinions. We all have advice or encouragement to share with those we care about. If no one listens to us anymore, that's when we feel very alone.

I imagine the Canaanite woman in today's text felt very alone. Her daughter was "*severely oppressed by a demon.*" We don't know what the demon did to this girl. In a different case recorded in the Bible, a demon possessing a boy tried to get him to throw himself into fire or water to destroy him (Mar. 9:22). Whatever the demon did to this little girl, it was a torment not only to her but to her mother also.

What could the mother do? She would do anything to make her daughter better. At first her neighbors sympathized with her. Maybe some doctors or spiritualists tried to help. But when

the girl could not be cured, they grew tired of listening to her mother. "All she does is complain! What are we supposed to do? She's driving us crazy!" So they stopped listening. They avoided her. The serious problem had not gone away, but now there was no one to offer comfort or help.

Perhaps you have felt like this woman before. Something was troubling you greatly, but either you didn't feel like you could share it with others, or when you tried to share it you were ignored. So you carried it by yourself, and the weight only became bigger and heavier. Or maybe you have been on the other side of things, and as much as you wanted to help someone, you couldn't make their problems go away. Their constant worrying and complaining overwhelmed you to the point that you decided to put some distance between yourself and that person.

Probably you have been in both of these camps—you have felt alone with no one seeming to understand or care, and you have avoided someone because you felt incapable of helping anymore. On the one hand, you learned that you don't have perfect friends, and on the other, you realized that you are not a perfect friend.

But while her friends and neighbors may have closed their ears to this woman, her ears were not closed. At some point, word traveled to the region of Tyre and Sidon about a Jewish man who could heal. Tyre and Sidon were coastal cities on the Mediterranean Sea about 45 miles north of Nazareth where Jesus was raised. These coastal cities were beyond the borders of Jewish territory. So they were inhabited by Gentiles, people who did not have formal training in the Scriptures but who were undoubtedly aware of the laws and customs of the Jewish people.

Not only did word reach the Canaanite woman about a Jewish man who could heal, but she also heard some say that this man was the Messiah, the heir to King David's throne, the long-promised Savior. This is how she referred to Jesus when she located Him. She came to Him crying out: "*Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon.*"

But Jesus had come to this place near Tyre and Sidon to rest. He had recently fed the crowd of 5,000 from five loaves of bread and two fish. He had been clashing with the Pharisees and scribes. And now He "*withdrew*" to Gentile territory. He and His disciples needed time away. The evangelist Mark tells us that Jesus "*entered a house and did not want anyone to know*" (7:24). But then here comes this hysterical Canaanite woman begging Him to heal her daughter.

Jesus acted like He couldn't hear her. "*He did not answer her a word.*" That could have been enough for the woman. When her cries went unanswered, she might have had some harsh words for Jesus about not being anything like the man she had heard about. She could have stomped off in disgust. But she persisted. The disciples heard her loud and clear. Her cries were so incessant that they now begged Jesus: "*Send her away, for she is crying out after us.*"

Why wouldn't Jesus listen to her and help her? He told His disciples: "*I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.*" He said the same thing to the woman: "*It is not right to take the children's bread—the saving Gospel for the Jews—and throw it to the dogs—the Gentile peoples.*" The woman was listening; she was listening very carefully. The "dog" comment might have turned many people away. But the woman replied, "*even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.*"

Jesus commended her not only for her dogged determination to be heard, but also because her faith had a foundation. It was not a faith-of-the-moment, or a faith of convenience if it could possibly help her daughter. Her faith was worked in her by God through His Word. She believed that Jesus was the promised Messiah, and she believed that if He had come to save the Jews, then He was able to save the Gentiles too. If God had *"bread"* for the Jews, surely He had some crumbs for the believing Gentiles.

This woman understood something that would not become clear to Jesus' disciples until after Pentecost, that Jesus was the Savior not just of the Jews but of the whole world. The disciples' ignorance explains why they showed no compassion toward this woman. To them she was no more than an annoying Canaanite. Not long before this, Jesus had chided "rock-solid" Peter, whose doubts caused him to sink like a stone in the water: *"O you of little faith,"* said Jesus, *"why did you doubt?"* (Mat. 14:31). But this Canaanite woman did not doubt, even when it seemed like Jesus wanted nothing to do with her. And Jesus said, *"O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire."*

Jesus was listening to the woman's cries all along, but He wanted to test her. Or maybe He was testing His disciples to see how they would respond to someone in need, even someone they would rather not be around. Jesus answered her cry for mercy because He is merciful—full of mercy. Mercy means that God does not give us what we deserve. He withholds judgment and punishment, not because we have earned it, not because we are somehow worthy, but because He is good and kind and compassionate.

The very fact that God's Son was walking as a man among us shows us this. He did not come to bring down the wrath of God on a sinful world. He came to bring salvation. He came to offer up Himself as the atoning sacrifice for all sin. He came to suffer and be nailed to a cross and have the Father ignore His cries for mercy, so that justice would be done. Sin had to be paid for, and Jesus paid the penalty with His holy blood.

His death in our place proves that God is merciful toward us, and that He will hear our anguished cries. One of our hymns expresses this beautifully: *"Jesus, in Thy cross are centered / All the marvels of Thy grace; / Thou, my Savior, once hast entered / Through Thy blood the holy place: / Thy sacrifice holy there wrought my redemption, / From Satan's dominion I now have exemption; / The way is now free to the Father's high throne, / Where I may approach Him, in Thy name alone"* (*Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary* #182, v. 8).

Jesus' death in our place means that God the Father hears our prayers and cries even when it seems like He doesn't. Often we become discouraged about prayer. We might think that God knows what we need anyway, so why bother praying. Or we might be disappointed that God did not give us something we wanted, so we gave up asking for anything. But our reluctance to pray, our doubts, and our impatience are problems with us, not God.

He invites and urges us to bring our requests and troubles to Him, whether they are large or small. He promises to hear them, every single one. And He promises to answer them, always in the way that is the best for us, even if we cannot see the good at the time. He wants us to pray

like the Canaanite woman, trusting His Word, never giving up, coming to Him again and again even when it seems like His ears are closed.

His ears are not closed. They are wide open. They hear you, every cry, every question, every whimper, every whisper. Maybe no one else is listening, maybe no one else understands. But God hears. He understands. There is no anguish or pain you feel that Jesus did not feel. He can sympathize with you because He suffered all things in His time on earth. He endured this suffering out of love for you. He suffered to save you, to bring you into communion with Him and to prepare you for the eternal glories to come.

He wants you to cry out in His name for all your needs, to leave your deepest concerns and struggles with Him. Pray for your own health and strength. Pray for your children like the Canaanite woman did. Pray for your brothers and sisters in Christ. Pray for your leaders. Pray for your neighbors. Pray boldly and persistently knowing that **The Merciful Lord Hears You**. He wants you to pray. He wants you to draw near to His throne of grace with confidence, where He promises that you will find *“mercy and grace to help in time of need”* (Heb. 4:16).

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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