

*Yet the little dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their master's table...*

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As we continue our Lenten Journey to Jerusalem and continue our discussion of Lent and the meaning of life, we are challenged by this Morning's Gospel to think deeper about ourselves and our relationship to God. The gospel presents to us a very moving and sometimes misunderstood interaction between Our Lord and a poor woman with a sick daughter. With just a cursory reading Jesus seems to be insulting this poor woman, and even asking her a kind of riddle. However, it is not quite as it first appears. But we however, are presented through this Gospel with a kind of riddle, *what does it take to get God's attention?* The church answers this riddle with another riddle, *what will it take for God to get our attention?*

We hear this morning that a woman comes to Jesus with a request, St. Matthew's Gospel tells us she is a Canaanite woman, St. Mark's Gospel calls her a Syro-Phoenician woman, in other words, she is a Gentile. She is a stranger and foreigner, from outside of the Israelite household, and she has come a long way, seeking the healing of her daughter, who is *grievously vexed with a devil*. In the eyes of the polite society of Jesus' day, she already has three marks against her, she is a Gentile, she is a woman, and she seeks the healing of her daughter who is possessed. But this does not deter her, she is a determined mother. She has come out of the same northern coasts into which Jesus is going, the coasts of Tyre and Sidon, the land of southern Phoenicia. God hears the prayers of this poor mother, and Jesus goes beyond meeting her half-way.

She makes her request plain; *Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou Son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a devil*. But what is so unsettling is how Our Lord responds. First, there is no response – *he answered her not a word* – silence. How could this poor mother walk all that way to see Jesus, and then confess in front of everyone within earshot that her daughter is badly possessed. And then there is the pain of rejection, those closest to Jesus shout – *send her away, for she crieth after us*. Then there appears to be a refusal – *I am not sent*, says Jesus, *but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel*. And finally, there is repudiation – *It is not right to take the children's bread, and to cast it to dogs*.

Only at this point of utter humiliation, when we are speechless with shock at the harshness of it all, even at the seemingly harshness of Jesus who usually has so much mercy on those who come to Him, is there the first glimmers of God's grace. She answers the Lord, *But even the dogs eat the crumbs which fall from the master's table*. Here is complete humility on display, here is revealed faith which is not often seen. And Our Lord says, *O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou*

*wilt. Great is thy faith*, a faith so strong that persevering in prayer and humility came naturally. Her faith which has withstood the crisis of despair, is rewarded. But what did it take? Perseverance, humility, trust, it requires a striving with God. We see this morning a different sort of Jacob wrestling with God for a blessing.

Any other person would have turned and went on their way. Can you imagine an average American withstanding what appears to be an insult or even a reprimand from the Lord Himself? But we must not overlook another major motivation from this Gentile mother. For this mother also shows us what it means to persevere in love. This mother loves her daughter so much that she sees her daughter's wellbeing and suffering as her own. She humbles herself before the Lord, she falls down and worships Him. Our Lord evoked her love and her faith as a lesson to His disciples and to us all. And through her great faith she is able to accept her position as a stranger and gentile, as one who in that land was beneath the Jews, and still she is moved by love, faith, and humility for God's grace, and not just for her own self but for her daughter. Our Lord goes beyond meeting her halfway, He stoops down to her in mercy and grants her prayer and her daughter is healed.

Some may just say that this is an example of the Lord being sexist and racist, but this is not so. Our Lord intended to heal her daughter all along, but first He wanted to draw out her love, faith, and virtue, for her benefit and for the benefit of His disciples and all those around Him. They who lived in a culture where the ideal prided itself on following strict codes of holiness and a family tree reaching back to Abraham, were shocked to learn that they were not the only ones with a lively faith, with a heart of love, and true humility. This Syrophoenician mother, this stranger, is held up to us this Lent as an example and role model for us all. Learning that we must persevere in prayer, faith, love and all with humility is one of the greatest lessons of Lent.

But this lesson is not just unique to Lent. The Church has been trying to drive this point home to us with every Mass. We hear in the prayer of Humble Access, that prayer that might make some of us uncomfortable, because it speaks so well to the nature of our engagement with all things divine. Together we 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.* We pray this as a necessary and critical part of our preparation and approach to the Sacrament of the altar. And by doing so we are invited to put ourselves in the position of the Syrophoenician mother of today's Gospel. We are encouraged to persevere in prayer, faith, love, and humility, grievously vexed with sin. We are reminded that humility is the condition of our access to God.

What we pray expresses a fundamental attitude of faith; it is not an attitude of presumption - in *trusting in our own righteousness* - but an attitude of humility - in trusting in *the manifold and great mercies of God* that is altogether crucial. In spite of all that the woman from the Gospel has endured, she is humble and by being humble she encounters *the mercies of God in Jesus Christ*. This is an important lesson for us this Lent; that in order to experience the mercies of God in Jesus Christ we must embrace humility – we must presume upon nothing else – for it is humility that gains access to the heart of Christ.

We come to the altar of God recalling the words of this woman which gives shape to our prayer. We are invited to go further in humility, for *we are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table*. May we perceive in faith the truth which this woman knew in faith, that *thou art the same Lord, whose property is always to have mercy*, the truth which the centurion knew in the presence of the crucified Christ, that *truly this was the Son of God*. We come like them in the struggle of faith, humbly, yet exultantly in penitential adoration. May our prayer also be, *O Lord, Jesus Christ, thou son of David, have mercy upon us*, that we may one day hear Our Blessed Lord say, *great is thy faith, be it unto thee even as thou wilt*.