

Sermon Lent 2 2020

March 8, 2020

Matthew 15:21-28

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning we meditate on the Gospel Lesson, previously read.

In this story of this Canaanite Woman, we have our Lord Jesus commending the woman for her faith. This tells us that her faith is exemplary, it's something we should hold up as a model to follow ourselves. And as we look at the story we can understand why. After all, look at how it goes. She first cries out to Jesus, and He ignores her. She keeps crying out. He still ignores her, so the His disciples ask for Him to just get rid of her. It seems like they're asking Him to give her what she wants, it's not clear, but in any case, just send her away. He says He's not there for these gentiles, but for the Jews. So, she begs Him again, and He tells her that since she's this gentile, she's a dog. It's not right for Him to give to her because what He has is for the children. And she agrees! "That's fine, but even the dogs get crumbs!" What amazing faith!

Now as we hear this story, and as we have this paired with the story of Jacob wrestling with God from the Old Testament, we see that this is the same thing. This Canaanite woman here is wrestling with God just like Jacob. God keeps pushing and she keeps pushing back. In fact, that's the beauty of this. Look at Jacob as He wrestles with God in this human form. And as I mention this we have to admit that we don't know just how this worked, in the history of the Church there have been those who have called this the "Pre-Incarnate Christ" and that makes as much sense as anything. But we'll let the mystery stand. Anyway, in this mystery Jacob pins the Lord, and he won't let him go. At least he won't let him go until the Lord does what? Until the Lord blesses him. Just like that, the Canaanite woman isn't letting Jesus go until He blesses her.

Now, I often say that's something I love about the Scriptures: they invite us to this wrestling with God. You know we so often feel embarrassed when bad things happen because we get angry about them. We get upset. We get frustrated. We even get upset with God Himself. In fact, I think that sadly there are likely many who have ultimately fallen away from faith just because they were angry with God about something and ultimately they felt that panging on their conscience. In light of that pang of conscience, they decided it was easier to not believe in God than to not feel guilt about that anger. And the devil, of course, loves to use this to drive people from

faith. But as I say that, do you think God can't handle anger toward Him? Do you think He can't handle your frustration or disappointment? Of course He can.

And you see this in the Psalms. Think about it, what some of those Psalms say. "How long O Lord? How long will you let my enemies triumph over me?" "Why, O God? Why do you let my enemies triumph over me?" Think about that. What ultimately are our enemies? You know we might think of this person or that person as our enemy. We might think about that group of people or that people as our enemy. But who are really our enemies? Sin, death, and the devil, right? And as we suffer, as we feel pain, as we hurt, whether emotionally or physically, all of this is the feeling that these enemies—sin, death, and the devil—that they are winning over us. And we can wrestle with that. God invites us to wrestle with that.

As I say that, we can say, where do we wrestle with these things? Where in our experience do we wrestle with sin, death, and the devil winning over us? In a sense, I think most often in our fears. We wrestle with them in our anxieties and our worries. Think about that. Sure we have our things that make us angry. We have our things that sadden us. But even with those, what underlies them? It's our fears.

For example, I see us wrestling with our fears about the coronavirus right now. You can see it tangibly in the stock market—interestingly the stock market always concretizes fears. If people are afraid of something, that something presents a risk and they take their money out of the market to protect it from that risk. But look at how the market responds to fears. California declared a state of emergency on Thursday due to the coronavirus and the Dow Jones dropped 1,000 points as the market wrestled with that fear.

Or perhaps you have other fears you wrestle with. Fears of what will happen to you, what will happen to your children. Fears of being alone. Fears of not being taken care of. Fears of where our culture is headed—as a pastor I certainly worry about that. Things are changing so quickly in the secularization of our culture that I fear before I retire from the ministry, I could be at risk for persecution or arrest for faithfully teaching what the Bible says.

But as we wrestle with these fears, we can look to those whose faith is exemplary. Fear of persecution? Look at the Christians in the First and Second Century. They were thrown to the lions in the Roman Coliseum. And yet they trusted the Lord had something in mind even greater for them. In fact, they saw this as a blessing. They saw it as a better thing to be persecuted and die in that a martyr's death than to die

naturally. Many of them hoped for that! And as I say that, that seems insane to many of our sensibilities today, and don't think it wasn't to many then as well. But the Lord's sensibilities are not our sensibilities.

Or look at Christians in the middle ages when it came to the Plague. There were many who would flee from a town or a village when the Plague came. But there were many Christians who didn't flee. In fact, many of them stayed to demonstrate the mercy they had received from God by showing mercy to those in need and caring for the sick. What does this say? They had faith like the Canaanite woman. They trusted the Lord, they trusted the Word. They trusted what that Word said. That the Word promised the Lord's presence and protection with them as they served those who were sick. They trusted that if something were to happen to them in that plague, God would care for their families in their absence. They trusted that should they lose their life in the process, the resurrection of Jesus manifest an even greater life to come. It manifest the resurrection of their own body free from pain free from suffering, free from all of this. They trusted that Word.

As I do with regularity, I read Luther's sermon on this passage, and in that he made a great point. This woman whose faith Jesus commends, before seeing Jesus in this context, she had heard something about Him. She had heard a Word about who He was. She had heard that He was the Lord, that He was the Messiah, the Son of David. And she had heard what that meant. Even though she was a gentile and not a Jew, she got it. And she clung to that Word. And that's what faith does. It clings to that Word, to that promise of who Jesus is.

In fact, think again about this interaction and how she clung to the Word in the midst of it. She clings to that promise when Jesus doesn't respond. She clings to that promise when Jesus says He hasn't come for her. She clings to that promise when Jesus calls her a dog! Think about how that must have felt. Think about how the desperation must have been welling up in her. Here she's hoping—maybe you could even say hoping against hope—that her daughter will be relieved. I've mentioned how in our time we rely so heavily on our feelings as an arbiter of all truth, that we see how we feel is what must be true. We even have this in the Church, where we seek an emotional experience rather than the comfort of the Word itself. But imagine what she felt in the midst of this. Like I said, the desperation must have been welling up inside of her. Her feeling toward God must have been great fear and disappointment. It must not have been one of happiness. And yet she clings to the Word.

And I love the image that finally comes from this. The Lord calls her a dog, and what does she say? “But even the dogs get crumbs from the table.” She trusts this Word so thoroughly that she calls it rightly. She wrestles with God till He blesses her. “Yes, I’m a dog, but I know you have so much to give that even the crumbs from your table are enough!”

Christian, there you have the greatest example. When you are crushed, when you are in trial and tribulation, when you are suffering and it seems like God is silent, and it seems like God is pushing you away, and it seems like He’s telling you that you are a dog, hold on to Him in faith, because even the crumbs from His table are more than sufficient.

As I say that, I think we can make a good connection to the Epistle lesson here. In that lesson Paul says that we rejoice in the glory of God, we rejoice because we’re saved by grace through faith, but we also rejoice in our sufferings. Now I’ve made this point before, but I want to be clear that I don’t think Paul is telling us we have to be happy about suffering. It’s not like we have to smile at God and tell Him how much we love our suffering. In fact, like I said at the beginning, we can even question Him about it, be upset about it. But when it comes down to it, we can see that this is a blessing. We can know it’s a blessing. Why? Well, as Paul says, suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope. And the hope in our Lord Jesus doesn’t put us to shame. We won’t be ashamed trusting in this Word of this Son of David on the Last Day.

That’s what the woman was finding. That’s what He had proved to her. As she understood where she stood before God, she knew that He wanted to give mercy and had plenty to give. And He still does. That’s why He went to the cross for you. That’s what He shows you in his resurrection, and that’s what He gives you in His Word, in baptism, in the Lord’s Supper. He gives you that proof that says, no matter how bad things get, here is my mercy in abundance. In fact, that mercy isn’t even just in one way. It’s not just baptism. It’s not just encouragement. It’s not just promises. It’s not just the body and blood “that you would know that I am with you.” It’s all of this, and more. In summary, it’s the mercy and the help that this Canaanite woman trusted was coming to her by faith. May our Lord use her example to enkindle that same faith in our hearts. Faith that wrestles with Him and doesn’t let go until He blesses us. Because He will bless us. He promises not only that He will, but that He already has now and eternally. Amen.