

15th Sunday after Pentecost, 2008 (Proper 16A)

Gospel: Matthew 15:21-28

Old Testament: Isaiah 51:1-6

Epistle: Romans 11:1-2a, 13-15, 28-32

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It's been about month of life together now, so let's review: First it was the pearl and the treasure. Jesus found us and joyfully sold all that He had to purchase us. Then it was dinner by the lake with 5000 of our closest friends- bread, fish, and lots of leftovers. Jesus satisfied us with the greatest banquet of all time. Last week it was the shrieking disciples who turned to confessors as Jesus walked across the water, over death and Satan to rescue us. Purchased. Satisfied. Rescued. Typical Jesus stuff.

We know this Jesus guy pretty well, and these are the kinds of things we expect Him to do: to purchase us and make us His own, to satisfy us when we're hungry, and to rescue us when we're in trouble. This is the Jesus we've come to know and love- some combination of Santa Claus and Superman.

But this Jesus from today's gospel doesn't seem to fit. This is not "typical Jesus." This is not what we've come to expect from our Savior. When the woman comes to Jesus and asks Him to heal her daughter, we expect Jesus to heal her right away, instantly. Jesus is all-powerful, right? Jesus is loving, right? We expect super-hero Jesus. We expect nice-guy Jesus. But instead, we get silent Jesus, and eventually mean and insulting Jesus. Are you sure this is the same guy who walked on water and fed 5,000 people?

First, there was the silence. There are few punishments as severe as the silent treatment. The woman is right there in front of Jesus. She's sought Him out and found Him. She's causing a scene and will not leave. The disciples plead with Jesus to just give her what she wants and let her go. But Jesus is silent.

You, no doubt, have endured silence from the Lord. You have pleaded with Him for things that you need, for your family, for your friends. Good things- not selfish things. You have prayed for healing, for reconciliation, for a new job, but there is only silence.

We Americans don't like to wait. We want everything done yesterday, and we expect the Lord to be on our schedule. We have our life planned out, we know the script (we've seen it on TV), how everything should go, and we are tempted to pray this way. But that is not faith.

Jesus does finally speak, but His answer is not what this woman is expecting to hear. His words are devastating. "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." Not you. I have come for others, but not for you. Surely the woman had heard how Jesus had helped others, which is why she came to Him that day. She may have heard how He had cast demons out of others. There was the demon-possessed man in the synagogue at Capernaum. There were the two men who lived among the tombs, and Jesus cast a legion of demons out of them and into the pigs. If others had been cured, then why not her daughter?

You may have felt this way, too. "Why are some healed, but I still suffer? Why do others have perfect families, and my marriage is falling apart? Why does my neighbor enjoy the good life and I'm just scraping by? It's not fair."

Jesus explains to what is fair to the woman. "It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." The final word of Jesus is the most cruel of all. "I can't give you anything

because you are a dog.” We aren’t used to hearing insults come from the mouth of Jesus (except maybe a few jabs at the Pharisees). There is no way to soften this blow. While you may think of dogs as cute, cuddly pets, this was not so in Jesus’ day. There’s nothing good about calling a woman a dog.

Did you notice how this woman was introduced? She is a Canaanite. Who were the Canaanites? Remember- they were the folks who lived in Palestine before the Israelites arrived from Egypt- Joshua, Jericho and the Conquest. The Lord commanded the Israelites to wipe them all out. What do you do with a God who plays favorites?

There are two possible reactions to a Jesus who acts like this. There are two ways to act when God is silent and against you. The first is to defend yourself, to claim that God isn’t being fair. “Now look Jesus, that’s not any way to treat me. I’ve tried to live a good life. I’m not perfect, but I’m doing better than most. I’m a decent person once you get to know me. My daughter certainly doesn’t deserve this, and she’s being tortured unfairly. I can’t help the fact that I was born a Gentile and a woman. That’s the way you made me.” This is the way we are prone to react when we hear the accusing words of the Lord- we want to defend ourselves.

But it is not the way of faith. Faith is not something you work up in yourself, some sort of inner strength that you call upon in tough times. Faith begins when you are emptied. Sometimes it is the suffering of a loved one that empties you. Sometimes it is the Lord’s silence that empties you. Sometimes it is the Lord’s Law- His words that accuse you, judge you, condemn you and empty you. But the Lord only empties you to rid you of any confidence in yourself, anything that will not hold, and to bring you to faith in Him.

Once emptied, faith looks to the Lord in prayer. Prayer is the voice of faith. Prayer is not manipulating the Lord into getting what you want from Him, arguing and bargaining and trying to control Him. Prayer is standing or kneeling before the Lord with empty hands, ready to receive what He has for you.

Listen to the prayers of this woman’s great faith. Three times she prays. First: Have mercy on me, Son of David. Second: Lord, help me. Third: I’d be happy with crumbs, thanks.

The first prayer is the cry for mercy. The cry for mercy is the cry of the beggar. It is the cry of the poor, the blind, and the leper. It comes from your emptiness and desperate need. This is how our divine service begins every week, not by being full of ourselves and how good we are and what an accomplishment it is to get up and come to church when everyone else is sleeping in. No, our first prayer every week is, *Kyrie Eleison* “Lord, have mercy.” This is how it went at the ordination service as well, with the litany. It wasn’t about how great the candidate was or what a perfect congregation this is, but “Lord, have mercy, Christ, have mercy, Lord, have mercy.”

Jesus’ initial response brought the women to her knees. This is the posture of begging as well. There is a reason why we kneel at the Lord’s Table. We come as beggars, joyful to receive whatever the Lord will give us.

“Lord, help me.” Is all the woman can manage the second time around. Perhaps you’ve prayed this prayer, too. “Lord, help me. I have nowhere else to turn. There’s nothing more I can do. The doctors say that it’s only a matter of time. I don’t know the right words, all I know is that I need your help.”

And finally, when Jesus calls her a dog, the woman does something remarkable. She doesn’t get upset. She doesn’t get angry. She says, “yes.” She says “yes, I am a dog. You’re right, Jesus, I don’t deserve a place at the table. And what is more, I’m happy to be a dog,

because the dogs get the crumbs, and even the tiniest crumb from your table is more than enough for me.”

And that is faith talking. Faith agrees with Jesus. This is the second way to react- not by defending yourself but by agreeing with Jesus. “Yes, I am unworthy, and I’ll take whatever you’ll give me.” Faith only receives from Jesus. Faith takes Jesus’ words and promises and uses them as the foundation for prayer.

This morning we, too, receive the crumbs from our Lord’s table- a small crumb of bread and a tiny sip of wine. But this is the Lord’s Table, and His crumbs are the bread of life. These crumbs still drive out the demons and bring eternal healing. We come as beggars on our knees, and the Lord hears our prayers and gives us what we need.

Strengthened by His body and blood, you go out to face whatever this week holds for you- suffering, silence, adversity- bringing all these needs to your Lord in prayer- knowing that He will hear you because of the great faith He has given you.