

REMINISCERE / THE SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT

Text: St. Matthew 15:21-28

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE ✠ SON, AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

“O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire.”

I once knew a young man whose father was dying of cancer. The man prayed every day for some miraculous cure, some new surgical technique or miracle drug. He wanted God to save his father. He loved his father very much and was afraid that losing him would be far too much for him to handle. But God seemed to remain silent, and the man watched as his father slowly slipped away and died.

To all appearances, it may seem that God had turned away from the young man, that He ignored his plea that God would save the life of his father. But that was not the case. You see, this man’s father had been unchurched his entire adult life; he only attended church for weddings and funerals. But in the course of his illness, he was visited by a Lutheran pastor. That pastor prayed for him and with him. He spoke to him about a SAVIOR that loved him and died for him. The pastor did not sugarcoat his words. He told him that he was a sinner, but that JESUS carried his sins to the Cross where they died with JESUS and were buried forever in JESUS’ tomb.

The man’s father was afraid that it was too late for him, but the pastor told him about JESUS’ parable of the vineyard workers, that those who came at the eleventh hour received the same wages as those who had worked all day long. The man’s father heard and believed, and in believing he was saved.

You see, God had, indeed, heard the young man’s prayer; He did save his father’s life. He sent a pastor to his dying father to save his eternal life, and upon hearing of his father’s saving faith, God strengthened the son’s faith giving him the strength to place his trust in God’s promise of the resurrection and the life of the world to come. Now the son looks forward every day to that great reunion in heaven where there are no goodbyes, no sicknesses, no death, where tears are only the tears of eternal joy. God heard his prayer and answered it by hiding His yes in His no.

There is probably not a more debilitating human emotion than the helplessness and the despair of feeling completely deserted and alone. Having nowhere to turn, and without one to listen or offer help during such times, is like being in the middle of a black hole from which there is seemingly no escape. Most of us have been there at one time or

another in our lives, and for some of us, it seems as though we have lived there for an awfully long time.

All of us have lost a loved one. Many of us have experienced broken homes and broken marriages. Some of us have suffered extreme poverty, not knowing if we can meet our financial obligations, put a meal on the table, or even keep a roof over our family's head. Some among us are fighting or have struggled, with a life-threatening disease with little or no hope of a cure, and some of us have looked on helplessly as our loved ones have succumbed to such a disease. Some of us have endured war and felt like the walking dead for weeks or months on end, not knowing if we would live to see the sunrise on the morrow. Some of us have been blessed with a long life, but live with the curse of death which has taken from us everyone we have ever known or loved in our lives and we are left alone.

At times like these, it seems easier to give up and give in than to fight back and hold on. It is easier to pull the blankets over your head in the morning than to get up and greet the new day. It is easier to be angry and find fault with those around you. It is very easy to find fault with God because when you pray for relief it is as though God has closed His ears to you and turned His face away from you. And the darkness gets deeper and darker.

I suspect that the Canaanite woman of our Gospel text this morning felt much the same way. After all, with a demon-possessed daughter where was she to turn? Who would save her other than God, and if God refused to hear her prayers and her plea for mercy what would be left other than to curse God and die?

Still, what right did she, indeed, what right have any of us to approach God in prayer, never mind approaching God in the flesh? The woman and her daughter in question were probably the least expected to do so. She was born of idolatrous people. Her people, the Canaanites, were ancient enemies of the Jews. One would think that she would be among the last people to trust in a Jew to offer her help of any kind. Any self-respecting Jew would have considered her and her daughter less than human. Indeed, the Jews considered her and her people to be as low as the unclean dogs who ate garbage in the streets and gutters.

Yet, here, we have an example of faith in action and the strength of faith even in the face of apparent rejection. Just as Jacob wrestled with God and Man in the desert, so too, this woman wrestled with God. For faith to grow it must be tested. Not as in proving it exists, for this woman's faith is already apparent. Having heard that JESUS was in the vicinity, she sought Him out. She called Him LORD and SON OF DAVID, titles of the long-expected Jewish MESSIAH.

No, the testing of faith is like making a fine blade or sword; its steel is exposed to the heat of fire many times in its making and then tempered by the proper cooling. So, too, faith; the greater the need and the tougher the struggle, when it seems we are at our weakest, faith is made its strongest, for God's grace is always sufficient. Faith that wrestles with God is faith that overcomes the world, Satan, and even CHRIST Himself! It grasps hold of God and will not let Him go without a blessing.

Such faith does not try to justify itself. It does not argue whether one is good or bad, worthy or not, righteous or unrighteous; it simply clings to God and His promise. It makes no demands, receiving disappointment and rebuke, and even seeming indifference and derision. Such faith allows nothing, not even the throes of death, to deter it from calling upon God in prayer—even though He has already seemingly answered one's prayer and said *"No."*

This is how the Canaanite woman approached JESUS. She cried out praying the prayer of the faithful, *"Have mercy on me..."* Our LORD's response? Seeming rebuke. The woman's response? Persistence. Determination. Tenacity. She would not let go of JESUS until she received our LORD's blessing.

Emboldened by faith, the Canaanite woman threw herself upon JESUS' mercy even though His words first seemed harsh. She embraced it, for her faith told her that real help could be found in no one else. She believed what she heard of CHRIST; that He is gracious and merciful, eager to forgive and restore. She believed, clinging to her hope that the SON OF DAVID came to seek and to save the lost. She persevered, and just as Jacob received a new name through perseverance, so too, this woman received a blessing, *"O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire." And her daughter was healed from that very hour.* She wrestled with JESUS and obtained the mercy she sought through the victory that is faith.

In the accounts of Jacob and this Canaanite woman, we see that faith does not guarantee life will be a bed of roses. Indeed, more often than not, it means just the opposite. JESUS, Himself, tells us, *"In the world you will have tribulation..."* But He also adds, *"... but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."*

Faith clings to JESUS and His Word, accepting and bearing up under the weight of the cross placed upon it. We are not born with such faith, rather it is forged within us in the heat of God's Law and the tempering of God's grace and forgiveness.

Faith in CHRIST throws itself on the mercy of God's righteous judgment and claims the promises of His unchanging Word. It confesses its weaknesses and seeks God's gracious mercy, love, and forgiveness, not on its own merit, but on the merit of JESUS' innocent suffering and His bloody death and triumphant resurrection. Faith trusts God to

be who He has promised us He will be—*“merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.”*

Thus, faith holds fast to God and claims His promised blessing. Faith does not evaluate itself asking if it is great or small but prays with King David: *“Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Make me hear joy and gladness, That the bones You have broken may rejoice. Hide Your face from my sins, And blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, And renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from Your presence, And do not take Your HOLY SPIRIT from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, And uphold me by Your generous SPIRIT... O LORD, open my lips, And my mouth shall show forth Your praise... The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, A broken and a contrite heart— These, O God, You will not despise.”*

Our LORD is never far from those He loves and calls His own. Just as He did not truly ignore the Canaanite woman and her plea, neither does He ignore you and your prayers. He came down from heaven for little dogs such as you and me. He suffered on the Cross for little dogs such as you and me. On that Cross, JESUS felt the weight of the suffering of the entire world and was forsaken by all He ever knew or loved. On that Cross, He was truly and completely alone; His darkness was utter and complete. All this He suffered for you.

Therefore, He hears your prayers and answers every one of them. His Blood cries out from the ground for you. How could JESUS not answer you? It is for this very purpose that He came—to answer your cries for mercy, to free you from Satan and yourself, to purchase your salvation, and to give you His righteousness, all that you may have eternal life. He paid your ransom and redeemed you from sin, Satan, and the grave. He paid the price for your redemption with His own Body and Blood and His innocent suffering, and death. How, then, could JESUS ignore you?

Thus, we are little dogs, no longer. In CHRIST, through faith, God has raised up for Himself true sons and daughters of Abraham. In CHRIST, we are forgiven, renewed, and made righteous and holy. JESUS supplies much more for you from His Table than mere crumbs; He gives you Himself, His true Body and Blood, given and shed for the forgiveness of your sins. In these, are His goodness, mercy, and love. In these, are your life and salvation.

Already, this very morning you have prayed the Kyrie, *“Have mercy on me, O LORD,”* and JESUS has heard you. You are healed, your demons cast out, your sins forgiven. In JESUS, you have overcome all that the devil can dish out. Satan calls you a sinner, but JESUS calls you a child of God. Come now, to the Table of the LORD and

receive there more than meager crumbs. Receive salvation and eternal life. There you will hear your SAVIOR say, *“O [how], great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire.... [For I have forgiven all your sins.]”*

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