

SUNDAY, MARCH 13, 2022 – LENT II – MATTHEW 15:21-28

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Amen.

“Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, ‘Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession.’ Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, ‘Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us.’ He answered, ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.’ The woman came and knelt before him. ‘Lord, help me!’ she said. He replied, ‘It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs.’ ‘Yes, Lord,’ she said, ‘but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.’ Then Jesus answered, ‘Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.’ And her daughter was healed from that very hour.”

How many of you know the President of the United States? Most of us have probably seen him on television, listened to him on the radio, or at least seen his picture in the newspaper. Yet, would you consider trying to ask him for a personal favor? I certainly wouldn't know where to begin to contact him, and I am certain that he would take one look at my request and say, “I don't think so.” That is assuming that he would even receive the request, which is highly unlikely. What is more likely is that our request would funnel its way to some lower level assistant to an assistant, and would never cross the President's desk. Most of us wouldn't dream of approaching a head of state and asking for something for ourselves – we would know

that it was doomed to failure because of his power and prestige and our lack of the same. The disciples in this case had a similar attitude – send this Caananite woman away because she is really making a scene.

This woman had two strikes against her from the beginning. She was a woman, and in this culture, women had little or no power. They were to remain in the background of civic affairs, and not have positions of power. In fact, she was not to approach a powerful man in public and say anything to him; she was to remain docile and servile. The audacity of this woman to stop such a powerful and popular man as Jesus showed either her desperation or her lack of understanding of her place in society. Secondly, she was a Caananite woman. The Caananites were descendants of the people living in the promised land after the Israelites escaped from Egypt. The instructions from God were to destroy all of them in the conquest. Even though they were not totally destroyed, they did not occupy a very high place in society, either. Combine these two factors, and you get a situation where a woman very low on the social ladder was approaching Jesus Christ and asking Him to heal her child. This seems like a very risky thing to do, and one which had little possibility for success.

Jesus' initial response seemed to fit with what the people of the day would expect – he wanted her to go away. His words were immediately backed up by the disciples, who wished to avoid a scene in the city square. He stated that He was sent to the lost sheep of Israel. This was the same as saying that He hadn't been sent to the Caananites, so get away! It must have been quite a scene – Jesus trying to get her to go away, and the woman determined that He would deal with her. A showdown was coming soon, and she was going to lose. To compare to our original example, the President not only wouldn't read the letter that she sent to him, but he also sent the

Secret Service to investigate why she would write the letter in the first place. The reception to the request wasn't getting off on the right foot!

We are left wondering why Jesus would do this? We can identify with this in our daily lives, too. It seems as if sometimes our prayers go unanswered. Sometimes He allows us to endure pain and suffering in our bodies. Sometimes He allows sorrow to touch us deeply, such as in the loss of a loved one. In these cases, we have difficulty seeing God's provision for us. However, we must remember that God's plan encompasses all of this world, not just our sinful wants. It is entirely possible that God has just determined that now isn't the right time to grant this request. Or, for whatever reason, God declares that it would serve to strengthen faith to delay His gifts. This was certainly the case with the Canaanite woman, and also with us – He wants the adversities of life to strengthen our faith and reliance on Him; but not to destroy us. Always remember that what God does is always good, and serves to further His kingdom.

If this was where Jesus left the situation, then we and the woman would have no hope. If Christ were like earthly rulers who were unapproachable and distant from us, our prayers would accomplish nothing. However, we have a Lord and Savior who can sympathize with our weaknesses. He bestows blessings on us greater than those which we could ever imagine. He continually blesses us with that which we do not expect, and that which we do not deserve. Of our own merits, we deserve nothing; because of Christ's once-for-all sacrifice on the cross, we have inherited eternal life.

An example of this loving kindness that Jesus shows to all men can be seen from the Old Testament. Isaiah speaks of the house of the LORD being a house of prayer for all nations. Rather than being a call for unionistic worship, this section of Scripture talks about the fact that Christ died for all people. Even those who are

outcasts from society, even those who we think aren't necessarily deserving of His love, are all welcome in His presence. This was different than the Israelites expected things to be – they were accustomed to special privileges because of their lineage from Abraham and King David. Isaiah prophesies about the future, that all nations will be gathered together under the one head of Christ the Redeemer. It's a good thing for us, too – most of us aren't members of the Israelites people, and are part of the evangelistic outreach that Isaiah speaks of. Most of us are Gentile descendants, aren't included in the promise to the people of Israel, and are only included in heaven's promise because God's love has no boundaries. This spread of the Gospel means that all races, all nations of people will be brought together as one by the shared faith in Christ, birthed by the Holy Spirit. This is a true basis for unity, and one that will keep them united, rather than just “agreeing to disagree”, as some would propose. Thanks be to God for His love, but also for His clear message that He alone is the Savior, and that He works in each of our lives to cause us to believe in Him.

In the story of the woman in Matthew 15, we are given the picture of very strong faith in the ability of Jesus to correct the situation at hand. She kept on trying to get His attention, even when He initially rebuffed her requests. When this didn't work, she tried pleading with Him to help her. She just wouldn't go away. This was due to the faith that had been put into her heart, to believe that He had the power to heal her daughter. After all, being possessed with a demon spirit was something that was very serious indeed. This would cause the daughter to be confined to her house, and was a tremendous trauma to her mother. During all of this asking for help, the faith in her heart also reminded her that she was completely unworthy of His help. This is evidenced in the Gospel account by relating that she prefaced her request by saying, “Lord, have mercy.”

Once we reach this point of total emptiness of ourselves, are we humble enough to receive God's blessings. As long as we continue resisting the Holy Spirit's working in our hearts, the gifts of God won't come. But, when we are completely humbled, God promises to bless us, His children, with more than we desire or deserve.

The Holy Spirit works the same quantity and fervor of faith in our hearts. Before His action, there is nothing but evil in our hearts, because of the completely sinful nature that is ours due to the original sin of Adam and Eve. After His working, however, the faith that is there is completely sufficient to salvation, because this justifying faith has been won for us by the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ on the cross of Calvary. His substitution for our need to fulfill the law was and is all that is needed to ensure that we have eternal life in heaven. Faith in this once-for-all sacrifice is the only requirement for salvation. We, too, have this quantity of faith. We believe through the Holy Spirit's urging that whatever we ask of our loving Father will be given us because of His great love for His children. This faith, though not birthed in the sinful man's heart, is still given to all men.

The woman in the story knew the power of God as a corollary to this faith. In the story before us here in Matthew 15, she tells Jesus that table scraps would be enough for her, because they were ones that fell from the master's (the Lord's) table. She knew that God was strong enough to heal, and that a small amount of His power was enough to do the job. This immense faith was enough, as the Scriptures say, to "move mountains", even though it was as small as a "mustard seed" in comparison to the awesome power of God.

How does God come to us and heal us today in our world so filled with sin? He comes to us and gives us the greatest gift of all, which is the hope of eternal life.

He promises that those who believe in Him and His atoning sacrifice on the cross will receive remission of sins, and with this eternal life with Him. Once the sin is gone, this is possible to live with Him, and He makes it happen. He gives us the gift of Holy Baptism to birth this faith, wash away our original sin from our parents, and give us a tangible reminder of this one-time gift of faith. He gives us the gift of His body and blood to eat and drink in the Sacrament of the Altar, given and shed for us for the remission of sins and strengthening in the True Faith. He gives us assurance of our forgiveness in His eyes when the pastor pronounces the absolution in the Sunday service, repeating the words of Christ that those sins confessed with a true heart will be forgiven by our gracious Father in heaven. Without any merit on our part, He gives us these gifts. He even gives us the faith to believe in their power. Far from being unapproachable and remote, our God is loving, gracious and accessible to us sinful men.

Even though we wouldn't approach a leader of our world due to fear of anger or not answering, we are promised the ability to make requests to God. Though He is mightier than all others, we also have His promise of mercy. He gives us saving faith in Christ as our one and only Savior from sin; this is the only prerequisite for the blessings He gives us. He even continues to strengthen our faith in the Word and Sacraments. We can rejoice with the Caananite woman that we don't have a God like our temporal rulers that ignore and do not have time for us; rather, we have a loving and merciful God. What a gracious and loving God we serve! He has done it all for our salvation!

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Savior and Lord. Amen.