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Isaiah 35:4-7a, Mark 7:24-37
Wrestling with God

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

²⁵But immediately a woman, whose little daughter was possessed by an unclean spirit, heard of him, and came and fell down at his feet. (Mark 7:25, RSV)

We can almost picture the scene when the mother takes leave from her little daughter for some portion of the day. “Hush, my child,” the mother says to her daughter. “I must leave you for a while. I hasten off to see a man who they say can help us. Do not cry. Do not cling to my hand. I must give this man a try. I have heard that he can save.”

And so it is that the mother leaves her daughter behind and goes off in search of Jesus. The child is always uneasy when the mother is away, and naturally, the mother is sad about that. But the mother has heard the winds of a rumor: good news concerning this man Jesus. They say he is a good man. They say he has healed many people. Why, they say he healed a man with a withered hand (Mark 3:5). He had healed many, so that they “pressed upon him for to touch him” (Mark 3:10). He had calmed winds and waves with but a word, “Peace, be still” (Mark 4:39). He had walked on the sea as if the waves were dry land for him (Mark 6:49). He had multiplied the fives loaves and two fishes and fed a great multitude (Mark 6:41-44). But chief of all, this mother had heard about another mother and father. The father was one of the rulers of the synagogue, Jairus by name. Jesus had come to their house, undeterred by the claim that the child had died. He came to the child, took her by the hand, and said, “Damsel, I say unto thee, arise,” and straightway the child rose and walked and everyone was astonished (Mark 5:41-42). So, the Syrophenician woman in our story has heard these good things and wants them for her daughter. And she means to wrestle Jesus to the ground, if need be, for the sake of her daughter!

She falls at his feet and begs him to heal her daughter. The child has a demon. We do not know the details of this demon possession, but this we do know: oceans of suffering are contained in those words “demon possessed.” Any mother would tremble and be sick at heart for her child to be possessed by a demon.

So, she takes her position of humility, kneeling at the feet of Jesus and begging him on behalf of her daughter. And this, a mother! We know little else about her. She is not accused of adultery. She is not accused of theft. Rather she is simply a member of that wonderful race before whom many of us bow our heads and whisper a prayer of thanksgiving: Mother. She is a mother pleading for her daughter. Whose heart would not be moved?

But Jesus seems unmoved. Indeed, he strikes her a hard blow with his words:

And he said to her, "Let the children first be fed, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."
(Mark 7:27, RSV)

"Am I dog in his eyes," she wonders. "Is my daughter but a dog for him?"

But she does not give up in despair. She has heard good things about this man, and she means to plumb him to his depths in search of those good things. So, she gives answer to the Lord. She reasons with him. She argues well. Indeed, she conquers him:

Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs. (Mark 7:28, RSV)

Then, with that voice that had stilled the wind and the waves, indeed, with that voice that had summoned light itself into being on creation's first day, Jesus gives his royal decree:

²⁹And he said to her, "For this saying you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter." ³⁰And she went home, and found the child lying in bed, and the demon gone. (Mark 7:29-30, RSV)

This foreign woman, this Syrophenician woman, thus won a great victory. She is a beautiful model for us of perseverance in prayer. She has heard that Jesus is a good man with power to save. So she keeps knocking on heaven's door till she gets some of that salvation.

MARTIN LUTHER

This woman is one of the great heroes of the Bible for Martin Luther. He likens her to Jacob of old, wrestling with God. But Luther does not want to elevate this woman as some distant ideal, as if her faith is supernatural and beyond our own ability. Rather, he urges that you and I should pray with the same determination and earnestness as this woman. Listen to Luther talk along these lines:

Her faith was very sharply attacked when he called her a dog. But she came back at him, saying: "Seeing that you call me a dog, give me the crumbs which fall from the tables of the masters and which belong to the dogs." This was assuredly a beautiful and illustrious faith and an outstanding example which shows the method and skill of striving with God. For

we should not immediately cast aside courage and all hope at the first blow but press on, pray, seek, and knock...

Even if he hides himself in a room in the house and does not want access to be given to anyone, do not draw back but follow. If he does not want to listen, knock at the door of the room; raise a shout! For this is the highest sacrifice, not to cease praying and seeking *until we conquer him*.

Now, what a line that is! We should seek to conquer God! Luther does not hesitate from such language. He wants us to strive, to wrestle with God, to contend with him, to enter into holy battle with our Maker! And if we should wonder whether we can succeed in such a tremendous conflict, Luther says, assuredly, yes! We can conquer him with our prayers because Christ has already surrendered himself in our favour. We just need to lay claim to this:

He has already surrendered himself to us so that we may be certain of victory, for he has bound Himself to his promises and pledged his faithfulness with an oath, saying (John 16:23): “Truly, truly, I say to you, if you ask anything of the Father, he will give it to you in my name.” Likewise (Mark 16:16): “He who believes and is baptized will be saved.” These promises will never disappoint you, unless you refuse to follow and seek. In this case, through your fault, by snoring and sleeping, you lose the most certain promises and Christ himself, because you refuse to enter this arena and take up the contest with God where the possession of these promises is seen and flourishes.¹

Did this Syrophenician woman actually *persuade* Jesus to do something he did not want to do? It seems to me that whether we answer “yes” or “no,” the lesson is exactly the same. If she did persuade Jesus, then we should be encouraged to go out and do the same. We should try our hands at persuading Jesus. We should choose our words, frame our arguments, rephrase things, repeat things, simply keep hammering on heaven’s door. This woman of old had success. If we have any good cause on our mind, like she did, we should seek success too.

And if she did not persuade Jesus, because, we can confidently say, he was *already* inclined to heal the daughter, nonetheless, we should follow her determined example. Indeed, anything else would be unsafe for us and unsafe for our daughter or whatever the good cause is that is on our heart. For what we *know* from the story is that this woman persevered in prayer and that Jesus was pleased

¹ Luther, M. (1999, c1970). *Vol. 6: Luther's works, vol. 6 : Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 31-37* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works (6:139). Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.

by this stubbornness. Indeed, he credits her stubbornness as a reason why he is healing the daughter:

²⁹And he said to her, “*For this saying* [her saying about the dogs getting to eat the crumbs from the table] you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter.”

So, either way -- either the woman did persuade Jesus to do something he had not intended to do, or the woman did not persuade him and could not persuade him because he already intended to save the daughter -- either way, pray on! Strive with the Lord. If there is a good cause on your heart, wrestle with the Lord over it.

And perhaps Luther’s way of putting things is really the best way: Jesus has already surrendered himself before us. He has proved with his life’s breath and blood that he means us well. So let us lay claim to his goodwill toward us, and go on persevering in prayer as long as we have breath in us.

Let me finish up by speaking of two questions that might come to our mind about persevering in prayer. First, how do we know that our prayer is for the best? Mightn’t we be praying for the wrong thing? And second, will we live to see the fulfillment of our prayer?

HOW DOES SHE KNOW HER PRAYER WILL BE FOR THE BEST?

First, how does the woman in this morning’s Gospel story know that in praying for the health of her daughter, she is not opening a future for her daughter in which she might suffer a broken heart or suffer something worse than she is already suffering? Answer: She does not know. But it is not her job to rule the universe. Her job is simply to bring her estimate of how things ought to go to the One who does rule the universe. If she has reason to believe that Jesus would understand her prayer, then let her pray on! And I cannot think of a thing in the Bible that would suggest that Jesus does not welcome the prayers of a mother on behalf of her daughter.

In the apartments of our city, in the farm houses across the land, in the huts of poor people across the world, in the mansions of the Hamptons, there are mothers praying for their daughters, parents praying for their children. Do not grow weary in such prayers. Do not fear that your prayer might not be for the best for your child. Leave that to our God, who well knows the deep desires of your heart and knows perfectly how to grant your prayer.

WILL SHE LIVES TO SEE THE FULFILLMENT OF HER PRAYER?

And pray on in the confidence that you will see the fulfillment of your prayer. The woman in our Gospel Lesson saw the fulfillment of her prayer that very day. Pray with similar hope. Pray that your prayer too will be granted that very day. I often pray such prayers when I am on the way to visit someone in the hospital. I pray that the one in the hospital will quickly see some concrete sign of the divine love that is in fact upholding her, upholding him.

But know this too. You will certainly *live* to see the fulfillment of your prayers because this matter of “living” is safe in the hands of our Savior Jesus. It might not be till heaven that we are able to see that our prayers have been fulfilled. But at least then, we will see it. One day, we will see that our prayers changed the fabric of the world. One day, we will see that our persevering in prayer made all the difference. This woman in the Gospel story brought to the attention of Jesus something he needed to know. She prayed as if she was *informing* him, as if she were contributing to his omniscience. And she won a great reward for her desperate prayer: she won the health of her daughter.

Let us pray like her. Let us steadily bring our petitions to the very throne of grace. Let us pray with the conviction that we are thereby arranging the health and happiness of those for whom we pray, and that both we and they will surely see someday, and be glad to use some good portion of eternity thanking our God for granting the prayer, through the grace and merits of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.