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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
The Midweek Liturgy, Wednesday, March 6, 2024
Matthew 15:21-28
O woman, great is your faith!

HOLY GOSPEL Matthew 15:21-28
Last week we read about Jesus standing up for his holy commandments. Now we read about the faith of the Canaanite woman who sought the help of Jesus for her daughter.

²¹And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²²And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and cried, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely possessed by a demon." ²³But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, "Send her away, for she is crying after us." ²⁴He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." ²⁵But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." ²⁶And he answered, "It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." ²⁷She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." ²⁸Then Jesus answered her, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was healed instantly.

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

My goal in this sermon is simply to join Jesus in admiring this Canaanite woman:

O woman, great is your faith! (Matthew 15:28, RSV)

I agree with the words of Jesus. Great indeed is this woman's faith. She teaches us to hang in there. She teaches us to persevere in prayer.

Who could not pity the plight of this woman? Her daughter is possessed by a demon — severely possessed. Perhaps the girl does not even know that she suffers, she is so possessed by the demon. But her mother knows. And so she asks for mercy:

Have mercy on me, O Lord... (Matthew 15:22, RSV)

There are mothers in our land who can stand shoulder to shoulder with this woman and repeat her prayer: "Have mercy on me, O Lord." Their children are suffering, perhaps with addiction, perhaps with mental illness. The heart of the mother cries out for help.

But Jesus answers with a strange silence. And so we read:

²³But he did not answer her a word. (Matthew 15:23, RSV)

This woman has journeyed to get to Jesus. Our text says that she “came out” from the region of Tyre and Sidon and cried to Jesus. She has left behind her familiar surroundings, her friends and kin. She has gone off to see the One she believes can help her. But he does not answer her a word.

So far, she has maintained a respectful distance from Jesus. In light of his refusal to answer her, who could blame the woman if she had given up and entirely withdrawn from Jesus? But this, she does not do. Instead, she brings herself closer to him:

²⁵But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” (Matthew 15:25, RSV)

In this way she teaches us that if our earnest prayer should go unanswered, then double down. Do not give up, but renew your prayer.

So, this woman asks again for help. And now Jesus does speak. But what disheartening words he says to her:

²⁶And he answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” (Matthew 15:26, RSV)

What perplexity must have come upon her! It is a wonder that she does not give up and go away. But not this woman! Not this woman Jesus admires so much. She weathers the blow. In fact, she takes the harsh words spoken to her and converts them into a reason for help. She keeps her wits about her. She keeps her eye on the ball. She believes that Jesus can help her daughter, and she does not mean to be put off.

And so she does not flinch at being called a dog. She does not sink into confusion. Instead she uses that very designation – dog – as a reason for Jesus to help her. She does not rant and rave about the Jews. Jesus says that his ministry is to the Jews. But this woman does not put down the Jews. She does not argue that they are unworthy of the focus of Jesus on them. Instead she credits the Jews with being “masters.” Let it be so. Let the Jews be masters and she but a dog. Still, she argues, dogs have some rights. They have the right to eat the crumbs that fall from the table. They may get a smaller portion, and yet they get *something* and what they get nourishes them. So, this woman asks for a dog’s portion. She builds her hopes for her daughter on this reasoning.

And Jesus is so pleased with this answer that he praises the faith of this woman in a way that goes beyond anything I can recall Jesus saying to the Twelve:

O woman, great is your faith! (Matthew 15:28, RSV)

Then, he instantly heals the daughter. He does not need to go to the home, and take the girl by the hand in order to heal her. He simply says the word and she is healed. As Chrysostom comments:

This was akin to that voice that said, "Let the Heaven be, and it was."¹

Why did Jesus delay in helping this woman? Chrysostom believed that Jesus knew of this woman's faith. He who knows all things knew the strength of this woman's faith even before she approached him. His delay, then, and his rough treatment of her gave opportunity for the disciples to see an example of strong faith.

And beyond this, she gives each of us a good example of perseverance in prayer. There are important things going on in our lives. Pray about them. Do not give up though the prayer meets with silence for a while. Do not give up, though someone might ridicule us for our faith in Jesus. Let it be with us that we do not bear needless pain because we gave up.

By the way, that phrase "needless pain" comes from a favorite hymn, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus." It is from verse 1 of that hymn:

What a friend we have in Jesus,
all our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry
ev'rything to God in prayer!
Oh, what peace we often forfeit;
oh, what needless pain we bear--
all because we do not carry
ev'rything to God in prayer! (LBW 439)

This hymn is great, but it does not admit that sometimes carrying everything to God in prayer can be hard. We can pray over and over again for something and it seems that our prayer is met with silence. But know this: Any silence we should meet in prayer will one day give way to answer, and it will be a great answer. It will satisfy our souls. Jesus will see to that. And to him belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

¹His homily on our passage in Matthew 15.