

Praying with the Canaanite Woman

Time after Pentecost - Lectionary 20
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Isaiah 56:1, 6-8; Psalm 57; Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32; Matthew 15:21-28

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

Matthew's gospel lesson should lead me to focus on worldwide evangelism—on the call to the Church to share the story of Jesus Christ with people around us. Most commentaries would consider evangelism as the general theme, with emphasis on sharing the love of God with those who are outside the mainstream. The prayer of the day reflects that theme, as do some of our songs. A week and a half ago, that's what I thought I'd preach about. But when I studied this Matthean passage, the world mission issue didn't seem as powerful to me in the moment as the aspect of the Canaanite woman's prayer. Her continual conversation with Jesus is a different theme, but a strong one, nonetheless.

Here was a woman who was not only an outsider in terms of her gender, but also in terms of not being an Israelite. Here was a woman who, in a sense, had no right to plead for mercy from Jesus, no right to beg for her daughter's health to be restored by him. Yet she cried out anyway. She knelt before Jesus when the crying alone didn't work. She debated with the Lord in order to get what she desperately wanted. She persevered in her dialogue because she knew Jesus was the only one who could help her. And Jesus' final response, after what seemed to be no response, and then a negative response? He proclaimed, "*Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.*" Matthew then tells us her daughter was healed that instant.

Great. I'm happy for her. But it doesn't seem quite fair. She was an outsider. Canaanites were considered by the Israelites for centuries to be a faithless group of people, worshippers of false gods. Of all the gall—this Canaanite had the nerve to ask, **over and over again**, for her daughter's healing. And what's more galling—she gets it! Just think of all the times in our lives when we have cried out to God . . . and begged and pleaded and ranted and railed and begged again . . . and heard only silence as response.

I'm not speaking about our childish prayers: "Please God, give me a pony for Christmas." "Please God, give me a pay raise." And I'm not denying that many times in our lives we've known our prayers to be answered, one way or another. We've experienced God's answers. But there are those gnawing, frightening periods when no answers seem to come.

The writer of the *Chronicles of Narnia* series, C.S. Lewis, knew of those times. He married in 1956, only to have his wife die tragically four years later. In another book of his, *A Grief Observed*, Lewis admits and struggles with the silence his prayers met. He writes, "*Meanwhile, where is God? This is one of the most disquieting symptoms. When you are happy, so happy that you have no sense of needing Him, so happy that you are tempted to feel His claims upon you as an interruption, if you remember yourself and turn to Him with gratitude and praise, you will be—or so it feels, welcomed with open arms. But go to Him when your need is desperate,*

when all other help is in vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face; a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence . . .”

This entire book by Lewis is his personal pleading, begging, crying out, kneeling before God, ranting and railing, in his own grief. He wants to see his wife again, and to understand God and death and life. He wants to hear the words, “Great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” But that is not what he hears.

Meanwhile, here was this Canaanite woman, who, after just a few minutes well spent, was getting up off her knees and going home with prayers answered.

It may well be that some of us here don’t like my words about the seeming silence of God. Some of us might consider any such discussion indication of a lack of faith. Others of us may consider it too painful a reality to bring to the surface. Sometimes we resort to making excuses for God’s seeming deafness. Lutheran theologian Martin Marty talks about just such behavior in a person: *“Never does a frown cloud her face. Lips . . . are now drawn tight in a cosmetic smile. ‘The Lord wills it,’ (she says). Never does the storm of a troubled heart receive its chance to be heard. The Lord has satisfied every need, one hears, so it would be a sin to stare once more at the void within.”*

In which case, I **admire** that Canaanite woman. She, to paraphrase Martin Marty, **dared** to stare once more at the void within. She wouldn’t go away, even when met with silence. She wouldn’t consider “No” as God’s answer. I have the sneaking suspicion she would have kept up all day, following Jesus, pleading with him until she was hoarse. She had a tenacity, a persistence of faith to keep on asking Jesus, even when he appeared to be putting her off. She pursued him, confident he would answer her.

And this is my take on the whole situation as it relates to you and me. Maybe that event, that single event in that woman’s life, is like a tiny microcosm of our lives in their totality. St. Paul in his letter to the Philippians urges them to pray unceasingly—I guess to be a lot like that Canaanite woman that day—doggedly pursuing God even when it looks like we’re being put off. Her five minutes may well be our entire lifetime.

I know the idea of it is frustrating, the actuality of it seems tiring and exhausting, as if you and I are destined to spend our lives saying, like the cell phone commercial, “Can you hear me now, God?” But isn’t it true? Do we not, you and I, have a lifetime of prayer before us, today being just a tiny part of it? Today’s prayers are just a small snippet in our years of conversation with God. Sometimes God’s answers will come right away. Sometimes they won’t. But we ought to keep the conversation going.

C.S. Lewis understood that woman’s tenacity; in fact, he shared that quality. His four journals following his wife’s death are what eventually became that book I mentioned, *A Grief Observed*. Only by the time he ended the 4th journal had he begun to sense God’s response to his prayers. See, it took much more than five minutes. It was a struggle in which he begged, pleaded, knelt, ranted, railed. At the end of it all? Oh, his grief still existed. His wife didn’t miraculously come back from the dead. But memories became less painful and more sweet. And God no longer

seemed detached or unconcerned. Lewis writes, *“When I lay all these questions before God I get no answer. But a rather special sort of ‘no answer.’ It is not a locked door. It is more like a silent, certainly not uncompassionate, gaze. As though He shook His head not in refusal but waiving the question. Like, ‘Peace, child; you don’t understand.’”*

This day is a tiny portion of a lifetime of prayer for us. Today is a mere snippet of time in our asking God for his mercy and healing and power and love in our lives. We’ll get a snippet of a response from God in the simple meal before us, where Jesus answers with a little bread, a little wine, and a little of himself. But I’m going to hold on to the story of the Canaanite woman, and use her as my role model in prayer. She would not stop bringing all her needs and concerns to Jesus. She kept the conversation going. She knew Jesus was the place to go, the person who would listen. And he did listen and respond.

Pastor Fred Buechner writes much the same thing in a favorite book of mine. He says about prayer: *“. . . keep on beating the path to God’s door, because the one thing you can be sure of is that down the path you beat with even your most half-cocked and halting prayer the God you call upon will finally come, and even if he does not bring you the answer you want, he will bring you himself. And maybe at the secret heart of all our prayers that is what we are really praying for.”*

Pray unceasingly, even when the silence seems deafening, and the seeming lack of response defining. Be as tenacious and persistent and confident as that outsider from Canaan, even if it takes a lifetime. And come to this meal, whenever it is offered, for a glimpse of the final answer. **AMEN.**