

“Bread for the Dogs” Matthew 15:21-28 Lent II March 7 - 8, 2009

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. It's bad enough when people turn against us and make life difficult. It's bad enough knowing that the devil is against us and seeks to cause all sorts of harm in body and soul. **But what do we do when it seems as if God is against us, when it appears as if He's our enemy? What do we do when He doesn't seem to care about our pain and trouble, doesn't answer our prayers, and doesn't help us out as we hope?**

That is precisely the situation in which the Canaanite woman finds herself in today's Gospel. The Canaanites, you recall, were the ones whom God had told the Israelites to drive out of the Promised Land. Canaanites were ancient enemies of Israel, pagans, heathen. They were not among God's chosen people. Israelites called the Canaanites dogs.

Yet knowing that she had no right to ask, this Canaanite woman still comes to Jesus and seeks His help. For she had heard the Word of Christ. Faith came by that hearing. She calls Jesus “**Lord**” and “**Son of David.**” She believes Him to be the Messiah. So she cries out to Him and begs Him to have mercy and help her daughter who is severely demon-possessed.

“**But Jesus answered her not a word.**” She is thirsty ground, pleading to the heavens for rain, but Jesus is a cloudless sky. Her prayer is met with a stony silence. It is as if He doesn't hear her. The silence of God is one way to describe what hell is like. Even in this world which is under the curse of sin and death, the Word of God still continues to give life and motion and blessing to creation, both for believers and unbelievers. But in hell, where God never speaks, there is no creative Word of His to bring any sort of life or joy or peace. There is only the emptiness and the nothingness of His silence, the utter agonizing, torturous loneliness and pain of being cut off from Him and His creating voice. That is where the Canaanite woman was.

The temptation when you find yourself in that same position is then to give up on God, to think, “**Well sure God loves other people, but He doesn't love me. It's no use. I'm not even worthy to pray, anyway, lousy sinner that I am. Why should I keep calling upon the Lord when it's done me no good so far?**” In that way the devil wants to shatter your heart and cause you to succumb to doubt and unbelief.

Sometimes God puts us into the hell of His silence, so that our faith in Him may be exercised and strengthened, and we may drawn closer to Him and to heaven in the end. Notice that Jesus did not say “**no**” to the Canaanite woman's prayer. He knows her faith, better than she knows it herself. He knows what He is eventually going to do. But for the moment He is silent, and in His silence, trust in Jesus is

tested and purified. **Does she trust Him when He ignores her? Do you trust Jesus when He seems to be turning His back on you?**

Faith clings to Christ and His Word alone. Faith clings to Jesus' death and resurrection alone and not to whether or not God seems to be coming through for us. Even if God never responds to a single word of our prayer in this life, even if He reserves all of His "yes's" for the resurrection from the dead on the last day, even if all we receive in this life is suffering and silence, so be it. We still have Christ and His everlasting kingdom and His forgiveness and His Word. We have God's "yes" even when the silence seems to say "no."

Jesus Himself experienced the silence of God in his own ears. He prayed on the cross, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" And the Father was silent. There was no voice from heaven, no angels to bring the answer to His "why" question. Not even His disciples stood with Him. There was only the thick, awful silence of God's judgment against us, laid on Jesus. Because Jesus suffered that hell for us, in our place, we are rescued and redeemed.

The Canaanite woman doesn't give up. She keeps crying out. The disciples become weary of her prayers and, thinking themselves more compassionate than Jesus, join in with her prayer, asking Him to give her what she wants so that she can return home. **Surely now Jesus will listen**, right? If you've got Peter, James, John, and the other disciples praying for you; if you've got all your friends and neighbors and the prayer chain praying for you, then God has to respond favorably, right?

Imagine the disciples' shock and dismay when Jesus replies, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Can this be the same Jesus who said, "Ask and it will be given you. Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened?" Now He seems to slam the door in her face and in the face of his disciples.

Again, Jesus hides His "yes" inside of a "no." He doesn't say He won't help this poor woman. He simply reminds her that He had come first to the Jews. The Gentiles would have to wait their turn, and that would come only after His death and resurrection. Just because you get a bunch of people praying about something doesn't mean that you're more likely to get what you ask for, as if this were a tug of war contest with God. Prayer doesn't work that way. There is faith to be exercised. The purpose of prayer is not to conform God's will to our will, but to shape our will to His will and to receive everything from Him as a gift.

"I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." This is the second way in which God tests and tries our faith in order to strengthen it. He acts as if we are rejected. He deals with us as if He had not come for us,

as if we have no place in His kingdom, as if we have no business seeking His help. Jesus doesn't even speak directly to the poor woman. He speaks to His disciples and lets her overhear what He has to say. Not only does Christ appear to reject her, he rejects the prayers of his own disciples. Christ teaches us to trust in nothing but Him—not our own prayers, nor the prayers of the pious and holy, nor the saints in heaven, but only in Jesus.

That is a hard thing for us to learn. We are increasingly impatient. We are accustomed to having things our way right now. Habits years in the making we want broken in a few simple steps. When we call someone, we expect them to answer instantly, drop everything, and respond to us right then and there. We expect the same thing from God. We expect our prayers to be dealt with immediately. We don't like to be told to wait and to hold on.

The Canaanite woman does hold on. In fact she persists even more fervently in the face of Jesus' rejection. Now on her knees and with a much shorter, more fervent prayer. She just doesn't give up. **"Lord, help me,"** she says.

How does our Lord respond? "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs." How cruel and insensitive Jesus seems! He utterly humiliates her in front of his disciples. This is not the kind and gentle Jesus we learned about as children. We would never put up with such treatment. We barely tolerate a rebuke or warning from a pastor or a fellow Christian, much less be called a dog by the Lord.

And this is the third way that God exercises faith—He breaks our pride and humbles us. He puts us down with the dogs. He humbles the exalted, and He exalts the humbled. **"He fills the hungry with good things, but he sends the rich away empty."** If you are resting on your achievements, your works, your piety, your good looks, your intelligence, you will be humbled. If you look down on others from your lofty position of self-importance, then be prepared. You will be humbled. And that is good and needful. Because it is on our knees, with empty hands and broken hearts and crushed spirits, that we are most ready to receive God's gifts. Our hands must be emptied before they can be filled. Before we can live in Christ, we must die to ourselves.

So what do you do when the Lord calls you a dog? The woman could have been indignant, walked away, saved her self-esteem. Instead she receives His judgment and confesses it. **"Yes, Lord, I may be a Gentile dog; but the dogs get to eat at least the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."** Do you see what she did there? This is the most important point of the whole Gospel. She traps Jesus by His own words and holds Him there, which is exactly what He wants. Like Jacob wrestling with God, she won't let Him go until she receives a blessing. She has him caught by His Word, embraced in great faith. **"If the**

Lord says I am a dog, then I'm a dog." But dogs get the crumbs, and she knows that the crumbs that fall from Jesus' table are rich crumbs of the Bread of Life, and her great faith will not be denied them. She is a true Israelite by faith; for she wrestles with God and man in Christ and prevails.

How the Lord loves it! He loves to be trapped in His own words! "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was healed that instant by the Word of Jesus. Her faith was great because she was nothing, a "dog," and Jesus was everything for her. Faith is great that clings to a great Jesus.

Jesus is indeed great. Greater than the demon that possessed the Canaanite's little girl. Greater than the Law which separated Jew and Gentile. Greater than your sin and your death. God's Law calls us something far worse than "dogs." It calls us sinners. And if God is to be righteous in his words and justified in his judgments, then all we can say is, "Yes, that's what I am, a poor miserable sinner; but Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, and so I trust in Him and will not turn my heart from Him but will cling to Him persistently for forgiveness, life and salvation."

The fact of the matter is you have an even more sure Word to cling to than this Canaanite woman ever did. For God has put His very Name on you by water and the Spirit. God can't vacate His name. He can't wriggle out of what He said and did for you at the font. Even when everything seems to be coming against you as a challenge and an uncertainty, your baptism nevertheless stands sure. It is a fact which surely happened on a specific day, and God does not now take His Word back. It is always there for you to hold to. With His Word God has gladly and willingly made Himself your captive. Hold on to Him. Cling to His Word. Trusting in Christ you will not only eat the crumbs that fall under the table, you will have a place reserved for you at God's table as one of His children. Come, receive the Bread of Life at the table of the Master, His body and blood, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. In the name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.