

"A Faithful Dog's Portion"

Matthew 15:21-28

August 20, 2017

Dear friends in Christ,

A close reading of the Bible reveals that many of the fiercest struggles that people have are not with the devil, not with the world, and not with the themselves. As Christians, these are ones that we know of and expect -- opponents that, with God on our side, are kept at bay. We sing of God's Divine Help in Luther's great reformation hymn ...

"With might of ours can naught be done,
 Soon were our loss effected;
 But for us fights the Valiant One,
 Whom God Himself elected.
 Ask ye, Who is this?
 Jesus Christ it is,
 Of Sabaoth Lord,
 And there's none other God;
 He holds the field forever."

However, it is sobering, and perhaps not a little disturbing, to realize that many of the fiercest struggles and greatest battles are with the Valiant One, with the Lord God, Himself. For example, Abraham is assaulted with God's demand to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. Job is afflicted in body, soul, and spirit. He asks a simple "Why?" but then must, himself, be questioned by the Lord God. Jacob wrestles with God in order to receive a Word of blessing and is given the strength of body to prevail and the faith of the soul to await the blessing.

Such a trial was no less for the woman in the Gospel Reading for this day. She was tested by God, she struggled with Him, and, in the midst of disappointment and despite facing opposition at every turn, she refused to give up or give in. God the Holy Spirit has caused the account of this woman to be written for us, showing that the life of the believer is one of continued, on-going persistence in the life and death struggle as a child of God. You and I are to recall and remember that nothing, not even death itself, is to keep us from calling upon the Lord and holding Him to His Word, even when He appears to be against us and when His answer is "No."

Please listen to the Gospel Reading once again, meditating on the Lord, His Word, the Canaanite woman, and the encouragement for us in our Christian faith and life. We do so under the theme A Faithful Dog's Portion.

"Then Jesus went out from there and departed to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a woman of Canaan came from that region and cried out to Him, saying, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David! My daughter is severely demon-possessed." But He answered her not a word. And His disciples came and urged Him, saying, "Send her away, for she cries out after us." But He answered and said, "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Then she came and worshiped Him, saying, "Lord, help me!" But He answered and said, "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs." And she said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their masters'

table." Then Jesus answered and said to her, "O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire." And her daughter was healed from that very hour."

When you stop and think about what has been said to this point, how some of our greatest struggles are with God, and how that truth applies to the Canaanite woman, you really begin to wonder just how she could endure it all. The struggles **with God** are so great because they are so **unexpected**. I mean, I really do expect to battle against this old sinful nature that clings to me. I truly expect the world to be against me and place temptations in front of me. I recognize that I must be aware that the devil is roaming around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour. But with all that facing me, I was thinking that I had enough to contend with, that I wouldn't have to wrestle with God.

Now, we need to understand that, truly, neither you nor I nor anyone I have ever met, had the awful situation and the horrible circumstances in life that this poor Canaanite woman had. The woman herself and the events of her life are so miserable that it is hard to imagine things being worse. First of all, she is a woman. In that time and culture, being a woman often meant being in a lower class and having a lower status. Second, she is a Canaanite woman. With respect to Jesus, she is a Gentile and He is a Jew. That means she is not one of the children of Abraham and not one of God's chosen people of Israel. She is an outsider with absolutely no genetic right to ask for help. Third, the woman's daughter is demon-possessed. Moms and dads stay up at night with a sick child, but parent's hearts ache when a son or daughter is sick with a serious disease for a long time. I simply cannot even imagine the awful anguish and plaguing pain a father or mother might have if a little daughter is demon-possessed; where Satan bodily invades a child. The thought is completely frightening. Her daughter was demon-possessed.

So what did she have? She had herself, her alien nationality, and her devil-plagued daughter. But she had one other thing. She had the Word. At some place, and at sometime, she had heard the Word. It was a sliver of the Word, a mere crumb of a report come into her pagan land, that this man named Jesus is the Lord, the Son of David. Perhaps she heard of what He had done in healing the sick and casting out other demons. It could be that she had seen such a miracle. We don't know the occasion of her knowledge for the Bible does not tell us. Next, she hears that Jesus is on the move and coming in her direction. Certainly, like what any other mom or dad in like circumstances would do, she would have sought the help of various remedies for her daughter's exorcism and recovery. But the potions and mumbo-jumbo all failed. But now, here, with Jesus in the vicinity, is the opportunity for her to make her plea to the Lord. Certainly, she must have had some conflicting thoughts. "Why should I ask anything of Jesus? Who am I? A woman. A stranger. A foreigner. A nobody."

In his house sermon on this text, Martin Luther says, "If such a staggering blow had hit our hearts, we probably would have succumbed and given up on prayer. For it is no joke when our conscience tells us, 'You have no right to pray; you don't belong to Christ. Let St. Paul and St. Peter pray, but our Lord God won't listen to you; you have no faith, are probably not among the elect, and not worthy to be eligible for and deserving of stepping before God to ask for anything.' With such thoughts and troubling doubts, the devil assaults and jabs at us."

The Canaanite woman closes her eyes to the fact that she is a Gentile and closes her mind to her pagan nationality. By faith, she trusts that the Lord will hear her prayer of petition; a plea, not for herself, but on behalf of her daughter and that He would grant it. And so, seeing Jesus, the Canaanite woman took that sliver of hope which was based upon a mere crumb of the Word and petitioned God with the title

the Hebrew people used, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David! My daughter is severely demon-possessed."

This becomes the example for us as Christians when assailed by personal doubts and devils. We too may reply, "Everything about me is true. I am indeed a great sinner and God truly owes me nothing but punishment and condemnation, now and forever. If anything were left to me -- to receive only what I deserve, then I am most certainly lost. But here is Jesus, my Savior and my Redeemer, Who died in my place suffering the wrath of God in my stead. There is nowhere else to go."

So, the woman followed Jesus into a house and begged Him, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David! My daughter is severely demon-possessed. But He answered her not a word." Not a word! Not a word? Silence from God. Why? Her mind must have been puzzled, "Where is the man about whom everyone is talking and praising His miraculous wonders and deeds? Is this man the one who is willing to help so many, but not me? What is it that I have from this Jesus? Silence." But neither her thoughts nor the Lord's silence deter her.

We might well ask, "Why was Jesus silent?" Was it for her that she might have her faith tested and become stronger as she grew in her trust of Him? Possibly. Was it for those around her, that they might realize the need to temper faith through trials? Maybe. It is quite possible that there was another reason why Jesus remained silent. Perhaps it was because she was not being completely honest with Jesus. She petitions Him with a greeting that was common to the Hebrew people, designating Jesus as the Son of David, giving the impression that she was one of the Israelite people, one of the descendants of Abraham and Sarah. His silence gives her an opportunity to be honest and truthful with Jesus.

His silence is incorrectly interpreted by the disciples, as they came and urged Him, saying, "Send her away, for she cries out after us." Their words are ones which make Jesus seem harsh and cruel. "Please, Master, send her away. Either grant her petition and she will go away thanking You, or, deny her request and order her to leave. Please do one or the other, for she is continuing to follow us into this house and to cry out after us."

Jesus answers both the disciples, by denying their request to send her away, and the mother of the demon-possessed daughter, who hears a shocking rebuke. He answered and said, "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Although she knew this was true, it must have been like a hammer blow to her. The reference to the Jews being sheep is a beautiful picture for them, conveying a picture of the Good Shepherd Who cares for those of His fold. "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." These difficult words of Jesus did not deter the Canaanite woman. Then she came and worshiped Him, saying, "Lord, help me!" Though still not admitting that she isn't one of the Hebrew people, she finds her way to the feet of Jesus and prostrates herself on the dirt floor of the house, assuming a position that a house dog might have.

But He answered and said, "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs." How much more is this poor mother able to take? Is she a glutton for punishment? No, she is simply a Gentile woman with a demon-possessed daughter who wanted the Lord God to grant her petition. Listen to her response and marvel at the work of the Holy Spirit in this woman. And she said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their masters' table."

Finally, she admits the one truth that she has withheld ... that she was not one of the sheep of the house of Israel, but that she was a Gentile dog. Her faith "takes Christ captive in His Word, when He's angriest, and makes out of His cruel words a comforting inversion, as we see here. 'You say,' the woman responds, 'that I am a dog. Let it be. I will gladly be a dog; now give me the consideration that you give a dog.' Thus, she catches Christ with His own words, and He is happy to be caught. 'Very well,' she says, 'if I am a dog, I ask no more than a dog's rights. I am not a child nor am I of Abraham's seed, but you are a rich Lord and set a lavish table. Give Your children the bread and a place at the table; I do not wish that. Let me, merely like a dog, pick up the crumbs under the table, allowing me that which the children don't need or ever miss, the crumbs, and I will be content with that. So, she catches Christ, the Lord, in His own words and with that wins not only the right of a dog, but also that of the children. Now then, where will He go, our dear Jesus? He let Himself be made captive, and must comply. Be sure of this: that's what He most deeply desires" (Luther).

This account of Jesus and the Canaanite woman is a classic; a marvelous example that is written in the Holy Scriptures for our sakes, in order that we might learn not to run away and hide when rebuffed by this Man Whom God permits to oppose us, and to call us dogs and Gentiles. Listen to the woman declare the truth, "Just as the little house dogs have a master from whom they receive fallen crumbs, so also the Gentiles must have a God from Whom they receive the blessings which are overflowing."

Then Jesus answered and said to her, "O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire." Hear is a woman who endured such an ordeal and would not waver that the Lord was bound to answer her petition; a binding with which He was glad to be bound. "How great is your faith, woman. How easily are My own people offended at the Word of truth, and how adamantly you seek and hold to a few words from Me. How quickly do My sheep of the house of Israel retreat from Me when I tell them that I am the Messiah, and how long do you persist in your struggles with Me. Let it be to you as you desire."

And her daughter was healed from that very hour. And when she had come to her house, she found the demon gone out, and her daughter lying on the bed.

In this account from the Bible, we begin to understand why the Lord Jesus acted the way He did and said the things He said and was so silent at first. He truly does not desire to present Himself as a stern dictator or as not interested in helping anyone. Rather, He wanted the faith of the woman to become evident to her and to those around her as well as to us. A faithful dog's portion is all that she sought. However, what she received was a full portion from the table as a child of God and member of the Kingdom -- a portion that our Lord desires all to have.

Prayer to God often takes place in the midst of life's struggles. Our petitions may not be answered as we would have them. When our Lord denies our requests and tells us "no," we sometimes become tired by the delay, wearied at the silence, angry at the answers, and end up wrestling with God. For a long time He might deny our petition and the answer remains a firm, silent, "No." In fact, we must let God say "No" to us for many months and perhaps years, trusting that He is looking out for our own good and the welfare of His people. How many years did Abraham wait until the promise of a son became a reality and baby Isaac began toddling around the tent? How many prayers did Joseph offer up to God while in an Egyptian prison? Ultimately, and at the right time that would benefit himself and his family, the Lord God said "Yes" to Jacob's son.

The Apostle Paul writes: And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness."

It is likely that Paul carried this affliction to the grave. He did not, however, have to bear it any further, for the answer to all prayers for the removal of suffering, sorrow, pain, tears, and hurt is answered "Yes" when we enter into eternity and are together with the crucified and risen Lord in Paradise.

May our dear Lord God Almighty help us to learn this truth so well, that with our whole heart we firmly believe His Word and promises, and through Christ, with the Holy Spirit's help, are eternally saved. Amen.