



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School
1611 E Main St., Watertown, WI 53094
(920)261-2570
www.goodshepherdwi.org

TENTH SUNDAY OF PENTECOST August 17, 2014

“A Feisty Faith”

(Matthew 15:25-28)

Rev. David K. Groth

“The woman came and knelt before him, saying, ‘Lord, help me!’ He replied, ‘It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to their dogs.’ ‘Yes, Lord,’ she said, ‘but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.’ Then Jesus answered, ‘Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.’ And her daughter was healed instantly” (Mt. 15:25-28).

Collect of the Day

Almighty and everlasting Father, You give Your children many blessings even though we are undeserving. In every trial and temptation grant us steadfast confidence in Your loving-kindness and mercy; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen

This is a surprising text, isn't it? It's surprising that Jesus is so gruff and insensitive with this Canaanite woman, so churlish and impolite. He calls her a dog! The other surprise is that, even so, she hangs in there. She doesn't break out in tears and give up, nor does she get angry and leave. She hangs in there, and perseveres.

How many of us would have persevered like she did? How many of us would have weathered the insults? How many of us would have left either dejected and sad or in a huff and a puff? Either way we would not have received what Jesus has to give.

It makes me wonder, as a people, a culture and a country, are we more thin-skinned than we used to be? Are we more prone to being offended and insulted and nettled than our fathers and forefathers? Are our feathers more easily ruffled?

I don't know the answer to that, but I do submit many of us do not have the tenacity and grit of this woman, and therefore would not have received the blessings Jesus had to give.

In our text, Jesus and his disciples have withdrawn to Tyre and Sidon, Gentile territory. This was not a mission to pagan cities like Jonah in Nineveh. Rather they are taking a breather from the opposition of the Pharisees and the growing demands of the crowds. Jesus isn't looking for contact with the local people, nor does he show any enthusiasm when this woman confronts him, beggin for mercy. She's a Canaanite, a descendant of that Old Testament race that the Jews were told to drive out of the Promised Land because of their idolatry, their practices of child sacrifice, and the like. There's a lot of history between Jews and Canaanites and none of it good.

She's also a desperate woman. She has a very sick little girl at home, who is, she says, "severely oppressed by a demon."

Surely this woman has tried every other help available because that's what parents do when a child is really sick. Nothing has worked. So this is no accidental meeting. She's been looking for Jesus. When she finally catches up to him, she shouts out "Lord, Son of David, have mercy." Somehow she knows who Jesus is. Somehow, through someone, in spite of her Canaanite background, she knows there are messianic expectations on this Jesus, and she knows of his reputation as a compassionate healer.

Jesus hears her shouting but carries on without even acknowledging her. Quote: "He did not answer her a word." Now, as a Canaanite she might have anticipated this, given the vitriol between Jews and Canaanites. But the cold shoulder is not enough to stop her. Instead, she turns up the volume, and continues crying out for mercy.

Can you picture the scene . . . thirteen men walking along as a group, with a woman straggling behind, lunging forward and then on her knees, pleading, shouting, begging for mercy. All this has no apparent impact on Jesus, but it's beginning to unnerve the disciples. "Would you please do something about her; would you send her away?!" Jesus answers them, just loud enough for the woman to hear, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." Translate that: "I'm not here for Canaanites or any other Gentiles. I'm here only for the Jews." At this point in time, the command to go make disciples of all nations had not yet been given. At this point in time, it's only about God's ancient people. No one else can make any claims on God's mercy. Nevertheless, his response does seem cold and uncharitable, don't you think?

You and I at this point would probably have walked away sad and dejected. Some of us would have moved from sadness to anger, maybe muttering something ourselves just loud enough for Jesus to hear. This woman does neither. Instead she raises the stakes. She throws herself at his feet and blocks his path. "Lord, help me!" she says. Now it's a direct confrontation, and all eyes are on Jesus. What's his next move going to be? We expect him to relent. We expect him to give the help she's been begging for. After all, that's what he does, isn't it? That's who he is. "As a father has

compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him.” Though I know this text well, it still takes me by surprise when I read what he said to her: “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” What’s wrong with him? Why so foul a mood? What has she done to deserve this?

He uses the word “dog” which you have to know this is one of those highly charged words, awful words. It’s a Jewish invective used deliberately as an offensive term for Gentiles. It’d be like calling African Americans by the “N” word.

Keep in mind, there were no warm and personal relationships with dogs at the time. The dogs of the Bible seem to be of the scavenger sort. They haunted the streets at night, and the town dumps. They were foul-smelling, half-famished, vicious little beasts, unclean, untrustworthy. Calling a Gentile a “dog” implied they were foul-smelling, untrustworthy, uncivilized little beasts. And Jesus has just used that word in reference to a woman. Such scorn coming from the Lord’s mouth! Today we’d call this a hate crime, and the courts would surely order up some sort of sensitivity training for Jesus.

It’s interesting how the commentators have rushed in to defend Jesus. One says the “cold print” of Scripture does not convey the “quizzical eyebrow or a tongue in cheek” or a loving smile. What rubbish! I’m not sure I even know what a quizzical eyebrow is supposed to look like. And I’m certainly not feeling the love behind his words.

Another commentator makes a big deal out of the word “dog”, noting that the Greek word used here is a diminutive, meaning “little dog.” That is, Jesus is not referring to the big vicious ones foraging around cemeteries and dumps. He’s referring to the little ones with names like Suzy or Peanut who sit in your lap with a ribbon in their hair. Again, rubbish! Only a dog-loving Western culture would suggest this reduces the offense. Besides, if little Suzy with a ribbon in her hair fits inside the mouth of my big dog, then she’s not really a dog in the first place, right?! In 1st century

Israel, a dog is a dog is a dog. They're all unclean and nasty.

So Jesus surprises us with his boorishness, but the woman also surprises us. "Yes, Lord" she says, "yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." She has some grit to her, this one, some perseverance. Or should we call that faith? She does not give up. She does roll over and acquiesce. Nor does she storm off. Instead, she turns his words against him, as if saying, "Fine! I'm a Gentile dog. I can live with that. But even the dogs can get a few crumbs from the table." On a dime, Jesus changes his tune. He loves what he just heard. That's the right stuff as far as the Lord is concerned.

Sometimes I can hear Ron Wille teaching his class across from my office, and he'll deliberately challenge a student with a view that isn't his own, in order to draw from that student a better insight, more true, more clear, more precise. The student eventually comes to the conclusion on his own in a way he'll never forget. That's what Jesus has done here. He's drawn out of this woman a better understanding of grace than she would have had if he had simply given the healing up front. If he had simply fixed her daughter at the first cry of mercy, this woman would have left knowing Jesus was a great miracle worker. But through this tortuous conversation, Jesus has drawn out of her a wonderful understanding of grace. He has drawn from her a feisty faith that will certainly serve her well the rest of her days.

And what of Jesus? He loves it! He can hardly help himself when confronted with such faith. He loves it when we hold him to his Word, hold him to his nature. "O woman," he says, "great is your faith!" He says that to a Canaanite! Then he says, "Be it done for you as you desire." In the end, Jesus gave her exactly what she wanted, and managed to stretch and strengthen her faith along the way.

He also lifts up the cheeky perseverance of this Canaanite woman as a model of faith for us. She won't take no for an answer, even if that "no" comes from the mouth of

the Lord, because the next time, maybe he'll say "yes." Christ commended this woman's faith not because it was so meek, but because it was unbendable, tenacious and persevering.

Former tennis pro, Bjorn Borg said his greatest strength was not his form or technique. It was his persistence. "I never give up in a match" he said. "However down I am I fight until the last ball." He never threw a game but battled for every point no matter how lost the cause and ended up winning a lot of matches that way.

Similarly, at the first refusal of our prayers, so many of us throw in the towel and conclude it must be God's will. We'll just have to accommodate it as the new normal. That's *not* how this woman worked, and that's *not* how the Lord wants us to work either.

Though strong, this woman is also humble. Her pride doesn't get in the way even when Jesus is poking at it. Often you and I are more interested in saving face than we are in receiving mercy. For example, we are slow to confess sin to one another and will avoid it if we can. But this woman doesn't let pride get in the way. It's as if she says, "Yep, I'm a Gentile dog. I can make no claims on the mercy you have for your chosen people. But I'm asking for it anyway because I know you are good and gracious and I know you can do this." And the Lord loves it when we hold him to his grace and nature.

Finally, with this Canaanite woman the disciples got a glimpse of the enthusiasm with which the Gentile world would receive Jesus, in a way that his own people did not.

Our last dog, Benno, would do anything for a Milkbone. He loved those things, and his enthusiasm put our fingers at risk. We had to get them out of the way. But it made it all the more fun and rewarding to give him those treats. Similarly, the Lord loves to give his Bread of Life to those who are really hungry. The bigger the appetite the more he's able to give. We have no right to this bread, not even crumbs the fall from the Master's table. In terms of grace, no one is entitled to it. If we were, it wouldn't be

grace anymore. But we need his grace desperately, and Jesus is glad to give it to any mouth and heart that will receive it eagerly and gratefully. This doesn't mean we'll always receive the healing we ask for, for a part of his gracious plan for us is not to keep us forever on this sin sick planet, but to bring us one day to a much better home. It does mean he will never turn away those who come to him looking for forgiveness and salvation. And for that we give him our thanks and praise!
Amen.

