

Second Sunday in Lent: Matthew 15:21–28

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Preached for the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A

She just wouldn't take no for an answer, this pesky Canaanite woman. No matter what Jesus said to her, she just kept coming back like a bulldog, with a faith that wouldn't let go no matter what. And even more amazing – this was an outsider to Israel! That's what this Gospel is all about this morning – God's universal grace to all in Jesus and the faith of a bulldog that won't let go no matter what.

Jesus was taking some time off on the north coast, the region of Tyre and Sidon. Gentile country. A woman from the region approached Jesus. That's two strikes against her already. A woman didn't approach a man in public. And a Canaanite wouldn't dare approach a Jew without causing an incident. Think of Palestinians and Jews today and then multiply it. This woman's little girl is demon-possessed and suffering. Jesus is her last and only hope.

"Son of David, have mercy on me!" She tries to pass herself off as an Israelite. "Son of David" is the Israelite term for the Messiah. Maybe Jesus wouldn't notice her accent or her facial features. Perhaps she could trick Him into a blessing.

Jesus says nothing. Stoney dead silence. He will not be tricked or manipulated. He's no vending machine into whom you plug your nickels and dimes of pious phrases and out pops your blessing on demand. No name it and claim it with Jesus.

The disciples think they have Jesus all figured out and jump on the bandwagon. "She's a pain; she's following us all over the place; tell her to her to get outa here." Sound familiar? It's the voice of exclusion, prejudice, hatred, suspicion toward the outsider, the stranger, the unclean and unwashed and unbelieving. It had been drilled into the disciples' heads from childhood. Canaanites were the descendants of Canaan, the cursed grandson of Noah. "Don't go near those people. Don't talk with them, eat with them, touch them. And don't you ever think of marrying one of them!"

Jesus ignores the disciples. And He sees through the woman's pious pretense. There's no pulling the wool over the Good Shepherd's eyes. He knows what makes you tick better than

you do. “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.” He reminds her of who she is: A filthy Canaanite. Certainly not one of the “chosen.” How dare she even talk to Him?.

“Lord, help me,” she says, now begging on her knees. This woman wouldn’t take no for an answer. Notice there’s no more pious “Son of David” smooth talking. Now it’s just the prayer of a desperate beggar – Lord, help me.

“It’s not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to their dogs.” Is this the Jesus we know and love and worship? The Jesus who says “Come to me with your burdens?” He calls her a “dog,” yes, a “little dog” but still a dog. Dogs are considered dirty in the middle east. They still are today. Not pampered pets; but garbage eating scavengers. “Dog” is what Israelites called Canaanites. It’s an ethnic slur. You probably know a few yourself. “You Canaanite dog, how dare you beg for the children’s bread.”

Still she refuses to go away. And she doesn’t stop praying. In fact, she agrees with Jesus. “Yes, Lord. That’s right. Dogs don’t deserve the bread of the table, but they do get to lick up the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” She’s got Him, and she’s not about to let Him go.

That’s faith talk from a Canaanite! An outsider. A non-Israelite. And it isn’t some yappy puppy dog faith. This is a bulldog faith that locks its jaws on Jesus’ words and won’t let Him go. Crumbs from her master’s table are a feast for her, and she won’t be denied. Oh, she may be a dirty Canaanite dog, but she clings in hope to Jesus trusting that He’s bigger than Israel and that His mercy is wide enough to embrace even the likes of her.

“Woman, you have great faith,” Jesus says. He honors her, and commends her faith. Faith that demands to be given to. Faith that doggedly clings to Jesus even when He appears to reject her. Faith that hears a “yes” buried inside the Lord’s “no.” Faith that won’t let go of Jesus,. “Let it be done for you as you desire,” Jesus says to her – warmly, gently now, accepting. And the moment He spoke those words, the demons left her little daughter, and she was healed. Just a word from the Word Incarnate, and the devils flee.

It’s a nice story, don’t you think? It doesn’t start out that way, but it ends up in a happy place. A little girl is healed; a woman of faith is praised. It doesn’t say anything about the disciples. It probably left them wondering, “What on earth is this Jesus up to? He even has compassion on Canaanites?” I imagine they spent some time reflecting on this little episode, how an outsider to Israel can have greater faith than the insiders.

We've walked in the disciples' sandals ourselves. We've judged the outsider, excluded those who made us uncomfortable, drawn lines and shut doors. We say that Jesus is the Savior of the world, but we act as though He were the Savior of the smart and salvageable. We're pretty good with the exclusive side of Jesus, but a little slow on the inclusive part – what our dogmaticians call the *gratia universalis*, universal grace. That makes us more than a bit uncomfortable to think that Jesus really is the Savior of the world, including those parts of the world we don't particularly like.

The disciples needed a new image of faith – the faith of the outsider, the Canaanite, the dirty dog. We need that view too, lest we begin to take pride in our piety, our purity, our religion, our doctrine, our liturgy, or whatever other credential we try to parade before the Lord. We don't deserve goodness from God. We are all like that poor Canaanite woman. We don't have a single chip to bargain with the Lord, and we dare not try to fool Him with our pious accents. We are beggars, who have no greater prayer than, "Lord, help me."

Each and every Sunday, the divine service puts us in the doghouse. "I, a poor, miserable sinner." "Lord, have mercy." The Law does that. Declares us all to be dirty dogs. Sweeps away every pretension. Shuts our mouths of all boasting, every way that we've learned to butter up God with our religions. It declares everyone to be a sinner, it magnifies and amplifies sin to be utterly sinful. You think it's bad? It's worse than you ever imagined. We're as good as dead dogs, says the Law.

But with the Lord, dogs get the crumbs that fall generously from the Master's table, and those crumbs turn out to be rich fare. "Take, eat this is my Body given for you; take drink, this is my Blood shed for you." This is Jesus talking. The same Jesus who went to the dogs in His death on that garbage dump of a hill outside of Jerusalem where your sins and sin of the world were dealt with once and for all. Dogs never had it so good as when they are under this Master's table.

You, who once were not a people, are now the people of God. Baptized. You, who once did not know mercy, have received mercy in Jesus. Forgiven. You are a priestly people, a holy nation, a treasured possession of God. You, who have no inherent right to eat and drink from the Master's table, have been given a place in the marriage supper of the Lamb in His kingdom which has no end. You, conceived and born in sin and death, have been embraced in the death and life of Jesus.

Scripture calls it “grace” – undeserved kindness from the heart of God to the least, the lost, the dirty dead “dog” of a sinner all for Christ’s sake. Amazing grace, universal grace, inclusive grace. All in Jesus. And in Him, baptized and believing in Him, you are no longer dirty dogs but children of Abraham, sons and daughters of God, with a place at the Master’s table.

In the Name of Jesus,

Amen

SOURCE

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Hacienda Heights, CA (htlcms.org), “Matthew 15:21-28 (13 Pentecost A)”, posted 2005-08-14 (<https://htlcms.org/2005/08/matthew-1521-28-13-pentecost-a/>).