

Even the Dogs Eat the Crumbs

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Our text for the second Sunday in Lent is from the Gospel according to Matthew in the 15th chapter:

“Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.”¹

The difficult thing in the account of the Canaanite woman is that we see a different Jesus than we’re used to seeing. What I mean is that rarely does Christ seem to be so cruel to those in need, especially to someone with such a noble petition. After all, the Canaanite woman doesn’t come to Christ asking for something that our Lord hasn’t already promised to give. She isn’t asking God for a new car, to win the lottery, or even for a quick televangelism-style healing. She isn’t looking for a bread king to do her bidding or some genie to make her wishes come true. And on top of this, she isn’t even asking God for the sake of herself, but for the sake of her daughter.

This woman’s daughter is in the clutches of Satan and she comes to Christ, holds His Promise before His face, and asks Him to crush the head of the Ancient Serpent:

“Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon.”²

We would be hard-pressed to find a better prayer than that. For this woman both recognizes Jesus as the Messiah and asks Him to do what the Messiah is supposed to do – to bind Satan and deliver her and her loved ones from sin, death, and the power of the devil. This woman grasps what the Pharisees rejected and the disciples often forgot. She has come to the conclusion of which all Scripture points us to – that Jesus is both Christ and Lord. The Canaanite woman has faith.

And now the difficult part. First, Jesus answers her not a word. The silence is uncomfortable. And eventually, even the disciples grow weary of it all and beg Jesus to send this woman away. Silence from God also has a way of making us ask questions. Was there something sinful with my prayer? Do I not have enough faith? Is God punishing me for something that I’ve done? Or simply – Why won’t God answer? No one likes a God who seems silent. We want answers. And more than that we want to experience results... But experience can be misleading.

¹ Matthew 15:27.

² Matthew 15:22.

Experience might have led the Canaanite woman to think that God didn't love her. Experience might have led her to curse God and return to her home. Experience might lead us to do the same in our hardships.

Although it might have seemed like it, Christ's silence to this woman was not a refusal. Rather, He was teaching her to trust His Word; because, in the end, experience must always be subjected to Scripture. Our experiences change every day. And for that very reason, experiences can't always be trusted. Often times our experiences are as unstable as our emotions. Yet, by contrast the Promises of God remain forever – they are constant and unchanging. And Christ would have us build our houses not on the shifting sand of experience, but on the solid Rock of His Word. The Canaanite woman does just that. She ignores her experience and instead she clings to Jesus – and faith persists.

Next, Jesus finally speaks, and hearing what He says, maybe some would have preferred the silence. He says,

*“I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”*³

This woman is a Canaanite, that is, a Gentile. She is not a daughter of Abraham by virtue of her blood; and her people were supposed to be wiped out along with all the other pagans when the Israelites took the promised land. She has no claim to the Messiah by her own merit or ancestry. Christ is brutally honest with her. She does not deserve His mercy.

And now that experience has been put to the test, this woman must also face reason. For reason would interpret Christ's words to mean that the Messiah was not sent for her and that she is outside of God's grace. Yet, Jesus Himself once preached,

*“Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven [that is, whoever believes in Me, that one,] is my brother and sister and mother.”*⁴

The kingdom of God is not defined by blood relation, but by faith.

Reason can no less be trusted than experience. By reason, the Word of God seems to contradict Itself. Reason at times says, along with the Devil, that God is a liar. But Christ would have us cling to Him all the more. The Messiah has come for the Gentiles too.

And so, the Canaanite woman kneels at Jesus' feet – in fact – more literally she worships Him. She holds on to the Promise that is beyond both her reason and her experience. And if her

³ Matthew 15:24.

⁴ Matthew 12:50 and John 6:40.

prayer at first was too wordy, if she adorned her petition with a show of piety, now her faith lays bare with just three words –

*“Lord, help me!”*⁵

Our Lord answers, and after all this, the weight of His words are crushing,

*“It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.”*⁶

The law of God is like a hammer. And this is the law in all its severity. We sinners are like dogs. And along with the Canaanite woman we have no right to sit at God’s table, no less to petition Him for help. For we, like rabid dogs, have all sought after the pleasures of our own hearts, even at the expense of our parents, our spouses, our children and our neighbors. We have time and time again returned to our pet sins, inviting the Devil to set up shop like he did in the Canaanite woman’s poor daughter. We have sinned against God by our fault, by our own fault, by our own most grievous fault.

Christ would not have us fight this truth and plead innocence; rather, He would have us repent – to admit that the Law is true and that it is good: Yes, Lord, we are dogs. We are guilty and we are ashamed. This is the first half of repentance, sorrow for our sins. And it is a necessary part of our lives this side of glory.

But the second half of repentance is equally important. For Christ would not have us sulk in our sin, despair of all hope, and return to our homes – that would put us in no better place than experience and reason. Rather, Christ would have us trust in His mercy. He would have us believe that for His sake we are forgiven, we are holy, and we are righteous. Christ would have us brought low that we might be raised up.

And so, the Canaanite woman accepts His insult. She offers no correction. She doesn’t make an excuse for her past or present sins and she doesn’t throw up her hands in defeat and despair. She agrees with Jesus, and she once again clings to Him and His Word:

*“Yes, Lord, for even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.”*⁷

Yes, Lord, we are sinful dogs, but You came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. Yes, Lord, we are weak, but Your power is made perfect in weakness. Yes, Lord, we do not deserve a seat at Your Table, but it is better to be a doorkeeper in Your house than dwell

⁵ Matthew 15:25.

⁶ Matthew 15:26.

⁷ Matthew 15:27.

in the tents of the wicked. Yes, Lord, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for us sinners to be saved, but with You all things are possible. You are the Son of David come to seek and save the lost. We are lost. Lord, help us.

And He does. Jesus answered the Canaanite woman and said,

“O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.” And her daughter was healed instantly.⁸

Jesus teaches us a very important truth in our text today – one that is so often forgotten or even downright rejected. For in our text, we come to see that in all this, our Lord was not torturing or tempting the Canaanite woman. God does not allow suffering to befall us as punishment. For Christ Himself bears all punishment on the cross... Yes, we often do experience the painful consequences of our sins. And yes, it often feels like God is ignoring us. But through His silence and even through hardships, God exercises and strengthens faith. For through such things our Lord teaches us that man shall not live by bread alone – not by experience, or reason, or emotion, or appearances, not by anything that the world can offer – but by every Word that proceeds from His mouth.

From His own mouth, Christ has spoken the Words of your salvation:

“Be it done for you as you desire.”⁹

By His death and resurrection our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of David, has declared you forgiven, holy, and free. Dogs no more, He has set you free from the bonds of Satan, adopted you as sons and daughters through faith, and given you a seat at His own table. And as children of God now you eat more than a dog’s portion of crumbs – for the Lord is your portion and your cup. He gives you His Body for true food and His Blood for true drink. May the Lord, in His mercy, help us cling to His Promises in faith and not lose hope. Amen.¹⁰

And the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Lent 2: Reminiscere

Matthew 15:21-28, Genesis 32:22-32, 1 Thessalonians 4:1-7

February 25, 2018

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⁸ Matthew 15:28.

⁹ Matthew 15:28.

¹⁰ This sermon is indebted in large part to a sermon on the same from Luther’s Church Postil. See <http://lectionarycentral.com/lent2/LutherGospel.html>