

INI

Matthew 15,21-28

Lent 2 — 21 February 2016

Greeting: To those who are called, sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ; mercy, peace, and love be multiplied unto you. Amen.

We hear a portion of the Holy Gospel According to Saint Matthew, which was read earlier:

But [the Canaanite woman] said, “Yes, Lord; but even the [little] dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their master’s table.”²⁸ Then Jesus answered and said to her, “O woman, your faith is great; be it done as you wish.” And her daughter was healed at once.

So far the reading. Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy sight, O LORD, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Introduction: When children are very little, they may have trouble determining the value of things. For example, show a small child a dime and a nickel and ask him to choose which is more valuable – by the way, you can only do this once – and he’ll usually pick the nickel. Why is that? It is because a nickle is bigger than a dime and small children often think that which is bigger is more valuable.

But when faced with a choice of table scraps fit for the family pet or perhaps the green yard waste container, what would you choose? Would you be satisfied with the table scraps or perhaps try to argue for something a bit more substantial? We know instinctively that table scraps are the left overs, and in no way are the same as a full plate of food at the dinner table. Why would anyone be satisfied with table scraps?

But that is exactly the question which we face when we read about the Canaanite woman in St. Matthew's Gospel – by the way, the incident is also recorded in the seventh chapter of St. Mark's Gospel. She actually not only wants the table scraps – but is satisfied with the table scraps! And Jesus' commends her for her wise choice!

This brings me to my sermon theme for this morning, "**A Great Faith Accepts Little Crumbs.**" I'll develop this theme in three parts:

- 1) Overcoming Obstacles**
- 2) Faith Has An Object; and,**
- 3) Coming With Empty Hands**

1) Overcoming Obstacles. When the Canaanite woman came to Jesus, she had to overcome some obstacles to get Him to hear her plea. And these were not minor obstacles.

First, she was a woman. In Middle-Eastern culture women were not to address unknown men. Men were the important

ones; women, not so much. And then she was asking for a favor for her daughter, no less. Women needed a dowry to get married. Sons carried the family name; women didn't.

Second, she was a Gentile. Jesus said that His earthly mission was to the lost sheep of the House of Israel. Gentiles and Jews did not get along. The rabbis even had a name for the Gentiles, “dogs”; this was not being complimentary. If you or I call someone a dog, I can pretty well guarantee it isn't a compliment, as in the phrase, “Boy, that person's a dog!”

Third, she was a Canaanite. We might not think this was an obstacle, but remember for a moment, the Canaanites were those who had practiced Baal worship and child sacrifice. This religion was repeatedly condemned throughout the Old Testament; in fact, when God told the children of Israel to take the Land of Promise, God told them to kill the inhabitants because of their vile religious practices; kind of like a level four physical and spiritual quarantine.

Fourth, it appears—and I say this in a qualified manner—she came alone. It is entirely possible that since her daughter was possessed by a devil, she was isolated, shunned by her family and neighbors.

Fifth, her behavior was not appreciated by the disciples. As far as the disciples were concerned, this woman was shouting and trying to get close to Jesus. She was probably jostling with them as she tried to get close enough so that Jesus

would listen to her plea. Perhaps the disciples formed a protective circle around Jesus; finally, when they couldn't stand it any longer, they said to Jesus, "Do something. Send her away, for she is shouting out after us."

Sixth, it would appear that Jesus Himself gave her a cool reception. When she finally was close enough to Jesus, it seems that Jesus had some rather off-putting words for her.

Yet she persisted. She pressed on. She did not stop shouting. She did not stop shoving. She did not let the disciples get in her way. She was not put off by Jesus' initial cool reception. She overcame every obstacle placed in her way. Why? Because

2) Faith Has An Object. But the Canaanite woman came and addressed Jesus as Lord and Son of David, and then bowed down to Him; both with her lips and with her body language she acknowledged Who Jesus was.

The object of her crying and carrying on was Jesus – Lord and Son of David.

Now we may say that she saw Jesus. She was there. She spoke with Jesus. But before seeing Jesus, she knew about Jesus – His reputation had preceded Him.

When Jesus performed His miracles it was to show people that He indeed was God's Son, the Messiah, Who had long been

promised. He was there to bring deliverance. His miracles again and again showed the people – and show us as well – that when He healed it was God working His forgiving, agape love in the midst of His people. One time Jesus asked a hostile crowd, “Is it easier to say, ‘Pick up your bed and walk,’ or ‘Your sins are forgiven.’”? By the way, that isn’t a trick question.

Did the Canaanite woman know everything there is to know about Jesus? Probably not. But she knew enough to recognize Him as the Lord and the Son of David. How much does one need to know in order to be saved? As Paul wrote to the early Christians in Rome: “If thou shalt confess with the mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised Him from the dead, thou shalt be saved” (Romans 10,9). Obviously, Jesus had not yet died, so he could hardly have been raised, but she certainly got the first part correct. With her mouth she confessed the Lord Jesus.

Faith is not a warm fuzzy floating around in the celestial spheres somewhere. This is no New Age feeling. Faith, saving faith, always has an object; and the object of saving faith, the object of faith that clings to eternal life, is Jesus, Who is the Christ, the Lord, the Son of David. It is as true today as it was when the Canaanite woman cried to Jesus.

But with that faith in Jesus, we see her

3) Coming With Empty Hands. She came with empty

hands. What does that mean? It means that she came and was depending on Jesus' mercy, on His compassion. She cried out what is reflected in our liturgy. When she cried, "Have mercy on me," in Greek that is *ελεησον με κυριε*, or as we say in English in the *Kyrie*, "Lord have mercy on us."

That cry of mercy is the equivalent of asking God to show His agape love. It is what Jesus is all about. It is not the cry for justice; justice gives a person what a person deserves. This was the cry for mercy, the cry for receiving what someone does not earn or merit.

Why should Jesus have cared? She was a Gentile, a Canaanite no less, a traditional enemy of Israel. But she had faith in Jesus.

She bowed down to Jesus and said, "Lord, help me!"

Now in the Middle East, argumentation and a back-and-forth banter has long been a tradition. At this juncture. Jesus even engaged in some humorous banter with her. So Jesus bantered with the woman, and said "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to puppies." Many translations have "dogs," but the Greek here is the diminutive, which indicates that he is not speaking about packs of feral or wild dogs, but puppies or household pets. And the woman gave as good as she took, "Yes, Lord; but even the puppies feed on the crumbs which fall from their master's table."

She wasn't asking to sit at the table with Jesus and His disciples. She wasn't asking to be considered as one of the children of Israel to whom Jesus had been sent. She was asking for the crumbs. The leftovers. The stuff that we might take out to the compost heap. She was going to be satisfied with the crumbs! She was going to be satisfied with the scraps!

But what crumbs those were! Jesus saw that she was waiting on Him. She was without anything in her; she was depending totally on Him. She was trusting Him for whatever He would do. And then Jesus said, "O woman, your faith is great."

Little crumbs, but a great faith – a great faith which accepted little crumbs. Why was hers a great faith? It was because she had a great Savior, Jesus, the object of that faith. And the little crumbs that fall from the table? Those crumbs were the gift of deliverance for her daughter, which in turn gave wholeness and forgiveness. Those crumbs were the very embodiment of God's endless love shown in Jesus.

Conclusion: As we hear the story of the Canaanite women who met Jesus, can we put ourselves in her shoes? I hope so. Because as we look at the Canaanite women, we should realize that there is no obstacle that Jesus can not overcome. There is no obstacle that should prevent Him from coming to us or we to Him. He does not call us to form a protective circle around Him, but rather to offer to others the invitation that He has offered us: rest for those who are weary and heavy laden. He

offers rest from the burden of sin, rest from the fear of death, and rest from the bondage of the devil. Because by dying to sin and rising to newness of life, Jesus offers rest and freedom from these traditional enemies, from these traditional obstacles.

Jesus offers us more than crumbs from the Lord's Table. Today, we know that He came for all: Jew, Greek, male, female, slave, free. His Word of Forgiveness is given to us so that we might live with Him and for Him in righteousness and holiness. To this end Jesus gives us the very Bread of Life through His Word, through the washing of Holy Baptism, through His Body and Blood in Holy Communion. Here we are refreshed and sustained. Here our faith is nurtured. Jesus' wish is that we grow in faith and trust in Him, and that we too may have the greatness of faith possessed by that Canaanite woman. This is a great faith, not because she or we are great, but because we have a great object of our faith, Jesus Himself, our lord, the Son of David. Amen.

Now, the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

St. Stephen Lutheran Church of the East Bay & Central Valley
21290 Birch St.
Hayward, CA 94541-1538

SDG