

Sermon for Lent 2 Reminiscere – Matthew 15:21-28

In the Name of the Father and of the Son ✠ and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Today's Gospel, Jesus' healing of the Canaanite woman's daughter, is regarded as one of the most comforting stories and one of the most encouraging examples in the entire church year. So how is this Gospel comforting to us? How is it an encouraging example to you and me? Two questions will help us answer this: (1) Who comes to Jesus? and (2) How does He act toward those who come to Him?

Okay. So who comes to Jesus? The Gospel says a Canaanite woman with a demon-possessed daughter. St. Matthew and St. Mark are the two Gospels that record this event. Now St. Mark's recounting of this miracle adds a detail that St. Matthew's account does not. It says that this woman, "had heard about Him." What did she hear? We know from the rest of the story that whatever she heard about Him was correct. She heard that God desires not the death of a sinner. She heard rightly that Jesus is the Savior. The only Savior. This is a truth that we can't hear enough. We have the rich opportunity to hear this truth again and again so let's not take it for granted: Jesus is our only Savior.

What else can we say about this woman? She was in great need. Her daughter was possessed by a demon. This drove her to cry out. This drove her to test the truth that she heard: Jesus is the only Savior, who desires not the death of a sinner.

But we also have a great need. It's because of our sins. It's not always easy for us to acknowledge this. We don't always feel the need for forgiveness. We don't feel the burden of our sin. And if we do, we try to remove it in some other way. We hope no one will notice. We cover it over with an excuse. We bury that guilt down deep to forget it. How often have we not looked first to Him who forgives sins!

Now this applies us. How easy a general confession of sin is for us. "I, a poor miserable sinner, confess unto You all my sins ... (blah blah blah) ... heartily sorry for them and sincerely repent of them ... (blah blah blah) ... be gracious and merciful to me a poor sinful being." How often have we said these holy words without them being felt?!? Sometime imagine Jesus standing visibly in front of you. Try to picture yourself actually in front of Him when you confess these words. Just see if your true condition as a sinner has an impact on you. See if you won't join the Canaanite woman's refrain: "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David!"

This type of shame over sin is difficult for us to find. The world and our flesh set all kinds of obstacles in the way. Mercifully, God often and in many ways removes some of those obstacles. Many of us here in this place have experienced it. How about having a serious illness to us or a loved one? The world looks a lot different and less appealing. Our relationship with God then comes into clear view. When a death occurs to someone who is close to us, we think more seriously about the life to come. We acknowledge our sin and unworthiness as never before. And God addresses us through other experiences in life as well. Maybe through a relationship that is gone sour. Maybe through a rough time in school. Maybe through a parent's concern for their child. People here young and old alike have some horrible past memories of things they've done or things that were done to them, things that still worry us today. All of these experiences in life teach us to look beyond ourselves for help. We learn to look for God for help.

But perhaps we've succeeded in driving sorrow and sadness from our minds. We keep a stiff upper lip. We're tough enough to get through. Each trouble gets more difficult, but we can still handle them. We don't allow ourselves to be drawn to God by our needs. Quite frankly, we prefer to look for help somewhere else. Like our good deeds. Or our things. But when that doesn't work (which it never does), and when we don't find true and lasting peace and comfort anywhere else (because we won't), that's when our hearts and eyes are opened to the Gospel. The big situations of our life and soul: grief, emptiness, sin, comfort, and peace; these things will vary from time to time for us. So go for what lasts: Christ. He seeks you; He saves you; He forgives you.

But sometimes this truth doesn't always seem true. Remember the Canaanite woman's experience? Christ seems to ignore her. Then He implies that His help is not for Gentiles like her. Then He calls her a dog. This was her experience with the Savior. And yet, she keeps going because He is the Christ who seeks, saves, and forgives her. In an ironic twist, the gift of faith actually entitles her to be worthy of having her prayer answered, of her being counted as a sheep of the house of Israel, and she being worthy of the children's bread.

Sometimes like the Canaanite woman, we think about Jesus, and we want to turn to Him, but we're stopped when we think about our sins. "Can a person like me stand before the Lord?" We learn from this Gospel to keep going. We learn to hold on to the Word of promise, in spite of everything. It will often seem as if God isn't listening to our prayers. Keep going. It will often seem as if we have received a harsh answer. Take refuge in God's Word. Even if God's Word just points out our own foolishness and sin and guilt. "God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness." This is a rather hard test. It's easy to say of ourselves, "I'm a sinner just like everyone else." It's hard to hear God say it to our own conscience. We're unsure about where we stand with Him.

Yet remember that His Word of promise is not unsure. That's what we hold on to. From this Gospel we learn that even if God seems to be harsh and angry—He is not. If our eyes weren't so clouded over by sin, we would see that in all of Scripture there simply isn't a harsh word spoken to any troubled sinner. This is the main point: Don't let go of God's promises—Christ seeks you, Christ saves you, Christ forgives you.

If you've ever seen a little boy or girl who is loved by their dad, who knows their dad's heart—look at that child when they do something wrong and dad gets angry. Does the child doubt his father's love? No, he doesn't. But that's how we should believe in God. If it seems as if we heard the Lord say: "Who are you that I should help you?" then say: "Yes, Lord, I don't deserve Your help, but still You sent Your Son to save and forgive me." Acknowledge that the Lord is right, but don't stop there. Keep going! Don't let go of Him! He is the Lord who keeps His promises. Hold Him to it. You will be helped, because there is not one person who has tried this and not been given the exact help God lovingly supplies to each of our needs.

Neither St. Matthew nor St. Mark record the name of the Canaanite woman in their Gospels. And I believe this is intentional. Nameless, she is a picture of all of us who cry out to the Lord in our need and persevere in faith to receive our Lord's promises. At the very least, the Canaanite woman has many brothers and sisters. And we are among them. Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠