

Sermon for Reminiscere (Lent II) – Matthew 15:21-28

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

“Then the man said, ‘Let me go, for the day has broken.’ But Jacob said, ‘I will not let you go unless you bless me.’” “And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying, ‘Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon.’” Wrestling for a blessing. That’s what two of the people from our readings did. It was Jacob the patriarch in the Old Testament and the Canaanite woman in the Gospel for today. They each wrestled in their respective times and in their respective ways. In the end each were blessed by God as well.

In Jacob’s case, he physically wrestled with God. Let’s take a closer look at the Old Testament reading. This part of the Scriptures is rather odd. As we hear it, we’re tracking along, learning about Jacob, and then all of a sudden Jacob is now, of all things, *wrestling* with someone. Who is it? Where does he come from? Why is he there? And of all things, why are they wrestling? What kind of wrestling are they doing?

What we know, first off, this was a marathon wrestling match. They wrestled all through the night, and all the way to the break of day. This is rather curious. Is Jacob really this strong? I mean, what kind of moves did this guy have that he could wrestle with God (who we find out, this is indeed) and hold his own? Whatever he did, it was pretty successful and caused the Lord to resort to some other tactics. “When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob’s hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him.” But even then, Jacob wouldn’t stop: “Then [God] said, ‘Let me go, for the day has broken.’ But Jacob said, ‘I will not let you go unless you bless me.’”

Jacob needed this blessing—he needed the Lord’s forgiveness. Jacob was guilty in many aspects of his life. He stole his brother’s birthright from his father. He had multiple wives and instilled jealousy in them. He needed forgiveness and this was born out in a physical way—wrestling with God. So God grants it: Jacob is given a new name (Israel) and a new life.

In today’s Gospel, a Canaanite woman also wrestles with God. Not in a physical way, of course, but in a conversational way. She had heard of Jesus’ fame; He’d done many miracles at this point: healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, cleansing lepers among other things; some miracles were even for the Gentiles, like her. Would His reputation of having mercy and giving blessing also be true in her time of need? She calls out, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon.” His response? The Lord is silent as a stone. It’s not as though he hadn’t heard her. She had called out in a loud voice. Will He not receive her? Was her good faith and confidence in vain? Was His good reputation a lie? Is He not a gracious and friendly God? Can she not depend upon the promise that God had no pleasure in the death of a sinner? This experience would tell her “no”; God cares nothing for her. But the Word she trusted still said “yes!” God cares!

Then the disciples plead her case: “Send her away, for she is crying out after us.” “Do what she wants, so she’ll leave us alone.” And while the Lord’s silence before left this matter in some ambiguity, now His words appear to be anything but unclear. “I was sent only to the lost sheep of

the house of Israel." And who was she? Only a Canaanite woman. She had no claim whatsoever to be considered a sheep of the house of Israel. Perhaps now her feelings tell her, "What's the use? His totally exclusive mission does not include me. My heart must let go of all hope in the Word of promise." But in desperation she cries out, "Lord, help me."

Our Lord's response seems even more disdainful and, well, just downright degrading. "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." It's as if He said, "Let go of me, woman! The day has broken. I must be about giving my blessing to that lost sheep of the house of Israel." The so-called merciful and loving Lord first ignored the Canaanite woman. Then, it seems, He excluded her from His mission of saving the lost. Finally, and if that weren't enough, He calls her a dog, even a dog who is unworthy of the children's bread and His merciful blessing. In the midst of this verbal sparring, the Canaanite woman begins to think that this is not a compassionate man who will help me. Her feelings tell her that it would have been far better for her to never have bothered seeking Him out in the first place, rather than have to endure being ignored and insulted.

And yet, this woman doesn't trust in her feelings and in her experience. She continues to grasp the Word of promise. The Son of God takes no pleasure in the death of a sinner. In Jacob-like fashion, she catches the Lord in the truthful insult that He called her and she won't let go. "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table." She agrees with Him. She concedes. She is a dog. But in admitting this, she catches Christ in His own word. "I am a Gentile dog; this is true. But I ask you nothing more than to what a dog is entitled. I ask only for the crumbs that fall from the master's table, yes the table of the Lord."

Jesus is caught. What can he say? Dogs really do eat the crumbs that fall on the floor. He let Himself be caught, just like when He wrestled with Jacob. But that's what He wants most. He must stay true to His Word. This woman didn't seek to justify herself by pleading her case as a descendent of Abraham or a daughter of Israel: She called herself a sinner, but a sinner nonetheless that Christ would redeem by His name. She receives His blessing and even healing for her daughter.

Have you ever wrestled with God about something in life? Have you ever questioned His wisdom, struggled with your circumstances, or asked Him, "Why?" Have you ever been upset with the Lord? Have you ever wondered why He caused something to happen? Have you ever just really wanted to pin Him down?

No matter how hard you're struggling with God or asking Him questions – no matter how much you are wrestling with Him – this image reminds you that in your struggle, God has a hold on you. In any wrestling match, the opponents are locked on to each other; it has to be so. The Lord won't let go of you, no matter your doubts or your distress, no matter your anxieties or your afflictions. To wrestle with God is also to be held by God. It's an awesome image.

This is the life we live. By faith in Christ we walk in repentance and we receive God's chief blessing, the forgiveness of sins. There is no greater blessing from Almighty God than that. So wrestle with God. He hears your cries for mercy. He is with you. He will never let you go. Amen.

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