

Homily for Pentecost 11, Sunday August 16, 2020

Matthew 15:21-29

'Encounters on the journey of faith'

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TEXT

²¹ Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²²Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.' ²³But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, 'Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.' ²⁴He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' ²⁵But she came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me.' ²⁶He answered, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' ²⁷She said, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.' ²⁸Then Jesus answered her, 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.' And her daughter was healed instantly.

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INTRODUCTION

Today in this little Gospel reading we have an account of one woman's journey of faith, And what she encounters along the way.

It can help us reflect on and learn about our journeys of faith,
And point us to Jesus as the one in whom we can truly find mercy in our need,
Although it can be hidden for a time.

I'd like us to trace this journey of faith today and see four things she encounters along the way,

family problems
dismissive disciples,
insults from Jesus,
and finally, the mercy she was looking.

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FAMILY PROBLEMS

First there were this woman's family problems which drove her to Jesus.

²²Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.'

So notice from the start that although this woman is asking for mercy on her,
The big problem in her life is to do with her daughter.

And we're not given any details about how this demonic influence actually affected this daughter,
But it sounds fairly terrible,
Tormented,
Severely oppressed other translations say.

It's worth noticing how often in the Gospels people come to Jesus not for their own needs
but for the needs of others,
And even more specifically,
It's worth noticing how on several occasions people come to Jesus specifically for their children.

There's this strange thing I've noticed that sometimes the burdens that weigh on us most heavily are not our own,
But those of others,

And it seems especially the case with children.

I know this is the case for many of you.

Time and time again I've been in conversations with people who have plenty of problems in their own life,
But there's some other loved one and the trouble they're going through that really weighs on them,

I remember even being in hospital with one person who was going through horrible health problems himself,

and when I asked what I should pray for,

his kids,
their problems,
the fact they seemed to be giving up on the life of Christian faith,

If this is you,
Know first,
You're not alone,

There were people who walked and walked with Jesus 2000 years ago coming to him with the needs of their children and other loved ones.

But more than just knowing you're not alone,

Notice here how these family problems don't push this woman away from Jesus,
But drive her to him in her utter desperation.

The problems in our families can do this can't they?

I know about the only time in my life when I'm come close to the sort of desperate faith and fervency of prayer this woman has,

Is when my kids have been in hospital,

One of them with some thing quite serious.

So first on her journey of faith is family problems.

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INSENSITIVE DISCIPLES

The next thing I want to point out on her journey of faith is her coming up again dismissive disciples.

Jesus doesn't answer at first,

So the disciples come up and say '*Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.*'

Now, I want to let you know that there are different ways of reading this.

Many including Luther understood the disciples positively here,
That they were actually asking Jesus to help this woman.

But many others also take the disciples words negatively here,
And that's the way we'll take it and think about it today.

Remember two weeks ago the disciples wanted to do the same thing at the feeding of the multitudes,
Send the crowds away,
But Jesus wont do that until they've been fed.

Here again the disciples seem fairly keen on getting rid of this woman,

No one likes a scene do they,

And here's this Canaanite woman,
This pagan worshipper of other gods,
An enemy of Israel,

Here she is making a absolute nuisance of herself,

And so the disciples want to get rid of her.

Now if this reading is the right one,

There's a significant point of application here for us all.

Because in our own journeys of faith,
How often is it that one of the big obstacles and challenges,

Are other disciples,
Our fellow Christians?

And so one thing pastors will sometimes say to new people who are becoming Christians or coming back to church,

Is don't be surprised when you have problems with other people,

This is not an idyllic community you're coming into where there are never any problems,

This is a hospital for sinners,

So when it happens,

When a fellow disciple is insensitive or abrasive and lets you down in some way,

Don't let that drive you away from God.

Look at the Canaanite woman,

The disciples want to drive her away but she keeps her eyes fixed on Jesus.

Now this isn't to excuse bad behavior among Christians,

There is also to be something about our life together which draws people into the circle of God's love.

But ultimately we don't believe in Christians,
We believe in Christ.

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INSULTS FROM JESUS

But what about when even that gets tested.

This is the woman's third encounter on her journey of faith,
And it's the part of the text that easily packs the most punch,

Culminating in what can only be described as an insult from Jesus.

It starts with just silence doesn't it?

She pleads for mercy,
He doesn't answer her a word.

But then it becomes an indirect refusal,

'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel'.

But then it becomes much stronger and very direct,

She asks again 'Lord help me',

And he says,
'It's not right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs'.

Now there are all sorts of possible explanations people offer which try to take the sting out of this,

But it seems to me this is an insult.

So what do we make of it?

Well,
Here's what I find interesting.

When most Christians read of the silence of Jesus,
The indirect refusal of Jesus,
This apparent insult of Jesus,

They find it very confronting, even shocking.

But then if I ask them,
If I ask you,

In your life of faith have you ever come to God in need and met with silence, at least for a time?

Have you ever felt like you've cried out to the Lord again and felt as if he was indifferent to your suffering?

Have you prayed and prayed,
And the situation seems to have gotten worse,
Before it gets better?

I'm yet to meet a Christian who does not resonate with those sorts of experiences at some level?

So that whatever we make of this interaction of Jesus and the Canaanite woman here,
There is something of our own spiritual experience reflected here in a profound way.

Now here's the thing though,
What do we do with it?

Do we demand our rights?

Do we give up on God because it's all so unfair?

That's the temptation isn't it.

Yet listen to this astounding response,

'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.'

She agrees with him!

She accepts her unworthiness as someone from outside God's covenant family,

But she clings to Jesus in faith and is even willing to beg for crumbs,

She's like Jacob,

Wrestling with God all night long and saying,

*'I will not let you go,
Until you bless me'.*

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MERCY

And so she's encountered family problems,
Dismissive disciples,
An insult from Jesus,

But finally she finds the mercy she was so earnestly seeking.

Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.' And her daughter was healed instantly.

Now I don't know about you,
But by the time I get to the end of this exchange I've more or less forgotten about the daughter.

The conversation is so dramatic that I forgot the original problem that drove her to Jesus!

This daughter whose life was an endless misery,
This daughter whose problems most likely affected every element of that families life,
This daughter who as far we know never met

You who have big problems like this in your family,
You know it has a way of coloring everything in life,

She was healed because of the mercy of Jesus,
And get this,
Because of the faith of her mother.

Jesus didn't tell her,
Your daughter will have come on her own and I'll deal with her directly,

Not on the basis of the mother's faith,
The daughter was healed.

Doesn't that sound like what we heard in the baptism this morning?

Here are Christian parents bringing their child to Jesus,

Their child inheriting the disease of sin and uncleanness that affects every single human being.

And we do believe that even infants can have faith in some sense,

But the articulation of faith we hear is that of the parents and the godparents.

Jesus is the one in whom we can find mercy and help,

Mercy and help for you,
Mercy and help for your loved ones,
Mercy and help for all people no matter who they are,
Where they are from,
And what they have done.

And our experience at times will suggest to us otherwise,

But we don't trust our experience,

We trust in Christ and his word of promise,

We cling to him in faith,

We persevere through trouble and suffering,

Through silence and apparent indifference,

And you will find mercy from Jesus.

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CONCLUSION

So her journey of faith began in the family problems,
It persisted through the insensitive disciples,
It encountered the silence and even an insult from Jesus,
And finally it found the mercy and help she so desired.

May God bless your journey of faith and you encounter all sorts of trials and troubles,
Hang in there,
Keep your trust in Christ,

In him is the mercy and help you need.

God grant it for Jesus' sake, Amen.