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Pentecost 9

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“A Dog’s Life”

Text: Matthew 15:21-28

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

She prayed. Just like we pray. She had great need, and didn’t know where else to turn. She was at the end of her rope. She was harassed and helpless, like a sheep without a shepherd . . . and Jesus is the one who has compassion on such sheep, right? So she prays. The same prayer we often pray: **“Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David.”** It is a prayer of faith.

Her problem was her daughter. She is **severely oppressed by a demon**. I don’t know exactly what that means, what was happening to her daughter, but I do know the feeling of helplessness when your child is in trouble. When you wish there was something you could do, but it seems that there’s nothing you can do. Even if you don’t have children, you know that feeling too - with friends, parents, or even with yourself.

So she prayed. That’s a good thing to do. That is, really, the best thing we could ever do for someone.

But the response? Nothing. Silence. Like Jesus didn’t even hear her. Apparently, she made sure He *did* hear, for given the disciples plea to send her away, she kept at it. She wouldn’t give up. Persistence born of desperation. But still, nothing. Silence.

Now, I could tell you that such silence is actually what was expected. Still today, in some parts of the Middle East, it is considered improper for a man to talk to a woman in public. But Jesus is supposed to be different. In fact, He *does* talk to women - we know of other accounts where He does. And He touches them and helps them and has compassion on them and does not consider them inferior in any way. But on this day, nothing. Silence. And then, in fact, in response to the pleas of His disciples, what seems like rejection: **“I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”**

You know what this woman was going through, when it seems as if your prayers are met only with silence and rejection. I do. Just consider the prayer list that is in our bulletin every week, and the people we pray for here in church every week. Some

of those people we've been praying for for a very long time. We pray for healing, we pray for faith, we pray for protection, we pray for compassion, we pray for miracles . . . and you know what? I've buried people we've prayed for, the problems of some seem to have gotten worse, and others are still waiting and suffering. And I honestly can't tell you which happens more - that there's a happy outcome to the prayers, or that our prayers are met with silence and seeming rejection. I know that's happened to you, too. What do you do?

Maybe it was because of who she was - she was a foreigner, a Canaanite, not of the house of Israel. Oh, she uses the right words: **O Lord, Son of David**. That was "house of Israel" language - but Jesus knows she is not from Israel. And maybe (we think) that is the problem with our prayers as well - we use the right words, but Jesus knows who we really are: unholy, unrighteous sinners who talk the talk but don't walk the walk. Maybe (we think), that like this woman, we don't deserve to have our prayers answered.

Or maybe we are like the disciples. What were *they* thinking? We're not really told. Did they ask Jesus to send this woman away simply because they were annoyed and tired of her crying out and just wanted a little peace and quiet? Maybe. But perhaps they were concerned, and even a little embarrassed, that the Lord wasn't acting like the Lord. Maybe they were asking Jesus to send her away *with her request granted* and prove Himself - that He is real and good and powerful. And to prove Himself, not just for the people of Tyre and Sidon, the region where they were - but for themselves; to justify themselves in following Him.

I think that's maybe the case for two reasons: **first**, it would help make sense of Jesus' answer; that He's not doing what the disciples asked because He was sent only to the house of Israel. But **second**, because proof is something I sometimes want, too. For what do you say when someone asks you why God hasn't answered your prayer? When you've been praying for so long and nothing changes? When the Lord doesn't seem to be acting like the Lord? Don't you wish at those times that Jesus would do something to prove Himself to those who question whether He is real and caring and powerful? And prove it to you, too? That it's worth praying and following Him?

Well, despite the doubts, the silence, the rebuke, this woman prays still. No more pretense. No Israel-talk. She may not know what is going on or why Jesus is doing what He is doing. What she does know is her need, and her daughter's need. And so she falls on her knees, and probably all the way down with her face on the ground, and just cries out: "**Lord, help me.**"

Now, at this point, if you're like me, you're thinking: OK. This has gone on long enough. She's proven her faith. She's persevered. *Now* Jesus will help. . . . But

instead, Jesus says: ***“It isn’t right*** - it isn’t good, it isn’t *godly* - ***to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.*”**

What could she say now? Silence, rebuke, insult. She isn’t heard because she says the right words, she isn’t heard because she was born into the right family, she isn’t heard because she deserves it in any way. There is nothing in her or about her that would cause Jesus to help her. And that’s true for you and me as well. We shouldn’t wonder why some prayers get answered while some seem not to be - we should wonder why God cares for us at all. As sinners, as rebels, we deserve nothing. As Luther wrote on his death bed: *We are all beggars. This is true.*

But this woman, this *Canaanite* woman, is willing to be whoever the Lord says - because the Lord says it. *Yes, Lord. Call me whatever you wish. It’s true. It’s all true. I’m a Canaanite dog. But **even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.***

If Peter last week was a little-faith, well here, Peter, is what a great faith looks like. It isn’t based on proof, it doesn’t know the outcome, it accepts whatever the Lord says, and simply clings to Him like a burr on your clothes. I don’t know if this woman’s faith was weak or strong; I don’t think this woman was worrying about it either. Great faith is simply faith that clings to Jesus. That trusts that He is good even when He does not seem to be acting good. That trusts that He will answer even in the silence. That trusts even when others think that trust foolish. And in the end, her faith is vindicated. Jesus answered her, ***“O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.” And her daughter was healed instantly.*”**

And so while this woman may be a *Canaanite* dog, she is, in fact, of Israel, a child of Abraham by faith. Jesus is the Son of David for her. As Isaiah promised and Paul explained, **Jesus is a house of prayer for all nations.** Which means that He is here for you, as well.

Now think about what that means: that Jesus is here for you. There is only one reason that Jesus is here for you - because He came to die for you. For all of us dogs. And He is here for us, even though we continue to act like dogs, returning to the vomit of our sin, over and over again. As we continue to do all those things we know we shouldn’t, and not do all those things we know we should, and then have the audacity to judge others and consider ourselves better. Really? And if that’s a blow to your ego, good. You need it. I need it. It’s called repentance.

And so we do as this woman: we pray, *Lord, have mercy.* Because He is the merciful one - from the very first sin to the very last. From manger to cross and now from His seat at the right hand of the Father - which is not some place far away in heaven, but is His place here, with us still, as God’s right-hand-man; our brother

who is with us as Saviour still, with all the authority and power of the Father. And He not only *can* help, He *wants* to help.

Yes, He *wants* to help . . . even if your prayers seem to be met with silence, rebuke, and rejection. Maybe all of that is the help you need right now. The Christian life is not a straight shot to heaven, a fast and smooth super-highway. It's more like going off road - with lots of twist and turns, bumps and potholes, and surprises around every corner. And it is humbling and ego-bruising, that we learn to rely not on ourselves, who we are or what we do, but cling to Jesus alone. Even if it means waiting, or crying out into the silence. Your Lord who died for you is good, even when He doesn't seem to be acting very good at all.

You see, life in the world is life under the cross. Just because Jesus died on it doesn't mean you can get away without it - it means that's where your life is. Under the cross. Getting good and bloody wet, as His blood washes you clean from your sin in baptism, and eating the crumbs that fall from that divine altar-table - His Body and Blood, which feed and strengthen you in His forgiveness, life, and salvation. For the cross is the mercy-seat of our Lord. The cross is the throne from which our Lord reigns. The cross, which looked anything but good when Jesus was hanging on it, but which turned out in the end to be the highest good of all.

So in the end, I guess we could say that the Christian life is a dog's life. It will never be a life that's the envy of the world. But you know what? A dog never had it so good!

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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

(Thanks to Rev. David Peterson and Rev. William Cwirla for some of the thoughts used in this sermon.)