

Lent II (5 March 2023)

“Then Jesus answered and said unto her, O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt.”

+In the Name...

This morning we find Jesus on the move. He is travelling to the very limits of the distance of how far he ever travelled in this lifetime. While we may think of Him as worldly because of the depth of His knowledge, He was a product of His time and was not a globe trotter the way the last several popes or even the Archbishops of Canterbury have been. With all due respect to the LDS Church, we have no knowledge of Christ venturing outside of the region of the Holy Land. So while Saint Matthew tells us this morning that Christ departed into the coasts of Tyre and Sidon, he never actually made it there. They were not far, but they were not Jewish cities, and were known for their debauchery.

Yet a woman came out of that area with a request. No, really a plea. She was begging for help. Her daughter was vexed with a devil. It is hard for us 21st century Americans to wrap our heads around what this really means. We do not regularly come across people that we

would say are vexed with a devil, or to put it in more contemporary idiom, are possessed by one. While the Church indeed has rites to perform an exorcism, even most members of the clergy do not know anyone who has had the misfortune of having to perform one. Yet my classmates from Africa at Nashotah House insist that such events still happen in the 21st century, even if not on this continent, and they are every bit as scary to witness as you would expect them to be.

The disciples act out the worst stereotype associated with 21st century Americans. “Make her go away,” they suggest to Jesus. “She bothers us.” In other words, we have more important things to do than deal with this gentile woman who won’t leave us alone and is keeping us from the real work of the synagogue. And just when we think (hope?) that Jesus is going to set these snobs straight and explain to them what the “real” work of the synagogue is, He validates their thinking! Not only does He validate what appears to us as backward thinking, He rubs a little salt in the wounds for good measure. “I am here for the Jews” He tells the distraught woman. The Jews are the children of God and the bread is for them. (Perhaps prefiguring His own Body becoming spiritual food for the Christian Church in the

Holy Communion.) Then He calls her and her people “dogs”. The bread is for children, not for dogs like you. We actually heard Jesus say something similar just eight chapters back in the Sermon on the Mount, but it was in a more general setting. He was not calling a woman who was standing in front of Him a dog. The earlier passage is where we get that famous saying of not casting one’s pearls before swine. Another insulting insinuation because the Jews would not have had the swine around because they were unclean animals.

But this Canaanite woman does not react in either of the ways we might expect. What would we have expected? When I worked retail in high school, management said there are two kinds of people when they get upset: walkers and talkers. Those who just leave, and those who stay and complain. One of those scenarios is the behavior we would have expected from this woman. She might have rolled her eyes and said, “This guy is a jerk” and gone home. Good-bye and good riddance. Another possibility is that she might have told Jesus exactly what she thought of His behavior. We have a saying for that too: give someone a piece of one’s mind. It is always said in a context where it is a gift one would prefer not to get. We could imagine this woman giving Jesus an earful.

But what does she do? Our text says that she worships Him. Now who would expect that reaction if you were reading this story for the first time. When was the last time you saw a patron at Macy's show reverence to the manager when he would not give her what she wanted? This woman realized what many of the Jews did not: she understood who Jesus was. Now let me qualify that remark. She may not have fully comprehended His divinity at this point (in fact, most scholars believe that she did not), but nevertheless she knew there was something remarkable about this man. And so she did not give up, but quickly turned the phrase back on Jesus: "I may be a dog, but even the dogs get the scraps that fall from the high table," she tells him. In our modern parlance we might say that she is asking Jesus to "throw her a bone". I wish we could see the look on Our Lord's face, as well as that of the faithful woman. Did they smile at one another? Any physical contact between a rabbi and a gentile woman would have been out of the question. There was no hugging, hand shaking, or whatever the first century Palestine equivalent would have been.

Notice that even the healing was done from a distance. Jesus never saw, much less touched, the woman's daughter. It was not yet time for the new Faith to fully embrace the

Gentiles. Despite Our Lord's apparent aloofness in this story, the Gentile Christians prized stories like this one. They were not bound by pride, arrogance, or racial privileges. They were free to accept what the Savior had to offer them. Christ's compassion on this woman was indicative of what would later be offered to the entire human race.

This exchange between Jesus and the Canaanite woman is Lent in miniature. This woman had no pretense that she was any better than anyone else, and her humility freed her from the social limitations experienced by the Jews that kept so many of them from realizing the greatest gift the world had ever received. That is what Lent does for us. We do not give up chocolate and red meat, or give alms and read theological works because God wants us to be miserable. That is Puritanical baggage that has somehow attached itself to American Protestantism: okay everybody, let's wear ugly clothes and walk around with a look on our faces like we just sucked on a lemon and everyone will think we are really holy! I do not find any such directive in the Decalogue or in the Creeds. (In fact, Christ tells us that our fasting should be done in secret!) We give up enjoyable pleasures and take on spiritual exercises and works of mercy in an effort to always keep God as our top priority. If we allow ourselves to

get too attached to the “things” of this world, we will cease to exercise control over them and they will control us.

“Discipline” is a naughty word. When Charles was a toddler, Danielle read a book that said when a child acts up, parents should call their reaction “discipline” and not “punishment”. I am not convinced it makes any difference to the child, except perhaps to make him dislike the word “discipline” instead of the word “punishment”. But discipline should guide us in Lent: our discipline ought to help us focus less on the tangibles that are so important to so many of our friends and neighbors. It is easy for us to get caught up in the never ending list of “must haves”. Commercial television is designed to make us want more and pursue what it is we have not yet realized.

Yet we should look again to the model of the Canaanite woman. She came to Christ to get healing for her daughter: a noble request from a humble penitent. May we strive this Lent to separate our lives from whatever precludes us from accepting God’s gift of love for us.

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