

Lent II (25 February 2024)

“Then Jesus answered and said unto her, O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt. And her daughter was made whole from that very hour.”

+In the Name of...

Some people are “dog people”: my mother falls into that category. Some people are “cat people”: my wife falls into that category. Some people like both: I fall into that category. Then there are people like my daughter, whom my wife is convinced is going to be a zookeeper. When she used to catch toads in the surrounding woods at Nashotah House, both for herself and the other children (including some of the boys!), we knew that it was not necessary for an animal to be cute and cuddly (at least by the average standards) for Elizabeth to like it. But the one thing people from all four of those categories have in common is that they do not want to be *called* a dog. I remember my mother telling me when I was young never to refer to a girl as a “dog”, regardless

of the veracity of the statement. (In my naiveté, I was bemused that my mother knew that term as slang; the usefulness of her advice was probably lost on me, at least initially.)

But here we have a rather strange interaction between Our Lord and a gentile woman, that might sound more like it came from a playground or perhaps a junior high schoolyard at lunchtime. If you were only halfway listening, it is easy to think, “What did He say? Did He just call her what I think He called her?!” Yes, He did. Well, sort of...

There are no two ways about it: Jesus would have failed His Pastoral Ministry class in Seminary if His professor had been witness to this scene. Let us look at it again: Jesus is out and about. He is not hiding in His office, so that is a good thing. But then this woman comes to Him with a request. Not just any request, but what we in the business would consider a pastoral emergency. She does not want to argue about something that came up at the vestry meeting nor does she not want to complain

because everybody brought potato salad to the last potluck. Her daughter is “grievously vexed by a devil” St. Matthew tells us. As Americans we cannot even fathom that: vexed by a devil. Sure, I get requests from time to time from complete strangers who want an exorcism, but none of them have been able to convince me that they really need one. Here, Scripture does not say that this Canaanite woman *thinks* her daughter needs one but implies the woman is telling the truth. Many of us parents are heart-broken when one of our children breaks a bone or needs stitches, much less is playing host to an evil spirit. And what is Jesus’ response. He ignores her! And more than that, His disciples request that He tell her to go away. “Oh, that woman again. She just will not stop bothering us!” Imagine if I ignored someone begging for help; I refused to talk to them; would you not be astounded? You might rightfully complain to the Bishop!

Jesus does not send her away as the disciples suggested, and finally He does offer a word of explanation: she is a gentile and He

has not come for the gentiles but for the Jewish people. Yet He is not in Israel but in gentile territory. This woman recognizes Jesus for what He is, something not all His disciples seem to be grasping. She even calls Him “Son of David”, a term we would expect from a Jew and not from a gentile. St. Matthew tells us that she worshiped Him. She kneels before Him, as a sign of His kingship, but also the power he wields. Jesus is not deterred however: this is where He says that one should not take the bread of children and cast it to the dogs. The Jews would be the children in this analogy and she and her tormented daughter would be the dogs. Still not willing to be left without what she came for, (How often does one see the Messiah walking through one’s own neighborhood after all?) the woman playfully says to Jesus, but even the dogs, in His analogy, get the scraps that fall on the floor. Her faith is so great, she knows that just a morsel from Jesus is enough to expel the demon exhausting her daughter.

Perhaps most surprising to some of us is that the woman does not argue with Jesus about whether she is a second-class citizen. She does not try to say that she is just as important as the Jews or that He should have come for everyone, especially given that He is currently coming through her non-Jewish region. Part of my Lenten discipline is to do more theological reading than I do during the rest of the year. I recently finished a book about Anger, and the author made the same point that many theologians make: the root of so many sins, including anger, is pride. We think that we are right and everyone else is wrong. And we are so quick to take offense that a simple clarification question can result in someone being horribly offended because his pride was wounded. Not this woman: “Okay Lord, you may call me a dog, but I know who You are, and I still have a daughter in need of the help that only you can provide.”

Contrast that with how the average American might react today: we seem to be looking for reasons to get offended. And

then once we do, we have to notify 5,000 of our closest friends and confidants via the social media of our choice so that the world can share in knowing how we have been wronged! Can't you just picture someone saying, "Well, if this Jesus fellow will not help us, we will just go down the street to that nice other synagogue. They are not nearly as impressed with themselves!"

This woman knows that her request will not in any way interfere with Christ's stated mission to the House of Israel. There is plenty of Christ to go around, even if the gentiles only get the leftover crumbs. Pride over race (she was not Jewish) or sex (she was a woman) or social standing (we are not told that she is anyone of consequence, and being possessed by a demon would have generally been viewed as punishment for sins committed) did not get in the way of her faith, and she was rewarded for it. Jesus recognized her faith and healed her daughter, one of only two instances in Holy Scripture where He heals a gentile.

Jesus heals the daughter of this woman, and so with the demon gone, the Holy Ghost can enter her. If you remember from last week's sermon, Scripture cautions us against expelling the devil from our lives without replacing him with something better, lest he return finding our lives more hospitable than they had previously been to him.

So, there is a double lesson here: Christ healed this woman because of her faith. But her faith was able to be strong enough to impress Him because she did not let pride distract her from what she knew to be the truth, even in the face of being ignored and ridiculed. Like us gentiles, she is brought into the family by adoption. No longer relegated to receiving the leftovers under the table with the dogs, cats, and toads, she and we are given a place at the table with all those who choose to believe.

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