

A Beggar at the Table

In the name of him sent to seek and to save the lost sheep of the house of Israel, dear friends in Christ: So, what do you think of the way we heard Jesus behaving in this morning's Gospel reading? It's a little unsettling, isn't it? A desperate woman comes to him in tears, pleading with him to have mercy on her poor demon possessed daughter. She begs for Jesus to set the poor child free from her grievous affliction. The whole thing is enough to break your heart. And at first Jesus coldly ignores her pathetic cries for help, then he snubs her pagan race indicating that he dare not lower himself so far as to attend the needs of someone as undeserving as her, and then, to top it all off, he insults her personally by referring to her as a mangy, scavenging dog. It's pretty brutal treatment. It doesn't sound like Jesus at all, does it? It might even make you wonder, "Who is this guy and what has he done with the gentle, compassionate Jesus we know and love?" What's going on here?

Actually, there's a surprising lot going on in this short story, and it contains some important lessons for us – specifically about the topic of prayer. So, to get to them allow me to set up the situation for you. You may remember a couple weeks ago we had the account of the feeding of the 5000. And the backdrop of that story was that Jesus and his disciples had planned a little retreat away from the press of the crowds who were always clamoring for their attention. The stress and strain of steadily dealing with all the people was beginning to wear them down, so they headed east out toward the desert wilderness for a time of rest and spiritual renewal. But it was not to be. A large crowd of people continued to follow them, refusing to let Jesus out of their sight. And when Jesus saw them, he had compassion on them for to him they were like sheep without a shepherd. So, he gave up (at least for the moment) the idea of taking a break, and he rolled up his sleeves to attend both the spiritual and physical needs of all the people.

Well, okay: it's some weeks later. Jesus and his men have been steadily at their work and by now their overall fatigue level is reaching the breaking point, so Jesus decides to try again to have some down time alone with his disciples. This time, however, he turns the other way and travels northwest to go down by the coast into the territory of the Phoenician Canaanites. This is pagan country where crowds of fastidious Jews are unlikely to follow. The Jews considered their pagan neighbors unclean and typically, would have attempted to avoid all contact with them. Even the disciples of Jesus probably felt quite uncomfortable taking their retreat here.

It's in this context, then, that Jesus encounters the Syro-Phoenician woman whose daughter is being tormented by a demonic spirit. For her the opportunity to see Jesus seems too good to be true. She obviously has heard about the powerful miracle working prophet from Galilee; but both because she dare not leave her daughter's side to travel so far to see him and because it would be nearly impossible for a Canaanite woman to journey alone in Jewish Galilee in her day and age, up until now Jesus has been completely inaccessible to her. And the very idea that a celebrated Jewish Rabbi – someone known as a great holy man – would come to the unclean land where she lived ... well, she could never have imagined it happening.

But now, amazingly, Jesus has come. So, she recognizes what an incredible opportunity this is for her to be able to approach him with her request for help. It's an opportunity she leaps at. And it's here that we should pause to take our first lesson about prayer, and it has to do with the attitude we have about it. My guess is that most of the time we think about it as if it were some kind of inalienable right that we're just automatically born with; but who says so? Sure, Jesus invites us to come to him at any time with whatever requests we have; but have you ever paused to consider just what a precious gift that is? We sing in the song, "What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer"; but do we really appreciate what we're saying when we mouth those words? That we who are just as unclean and in a spiritual sense far more removed from the holy God than this Canaanite woman ever was from Jesus in a geographical sense are invited to come to him whenever we please ... to have such immediate access to the throne of God, the King of the universe, through Jesus who is ever with us – could it be that we take it too much for granted? And that through our neglect of the privilege we effectively despise it? I know I'm guilty. How about you? Would that we all might see our situation like this Canaanite woman and value prayer for the priceless treasure that it is; and then, as a result, take more advantage of it.

But let's move on, shall we? Let's consider *how* she makes her request. You'll note that she makes no claims for herself. She doesn't attempt to bargain, "if you do this then I'll do that"; nor does she try to stand on some inherent goodness she has or any past work of charity that might have earned her a favorable response. Instead she comes to Jesus with what was the standard plea of a beggar in that day: "Lord, have mercy."

There's a lesson there for all of us; but what I'd really like to focus on is her (forgive the pun) "dogged" determination to press on despite the fact that Jesus seems to ignore her. This poor woman hasn't had a fraction of the exposure to Jesus that we enjoy. She's never heard his teaching, never heard the Word of God spoken in a worship service. All she's likely had is a few third- or fourth-hand accounts of what Jesus has been doing over in Galilee. But from these accounts she's learned two things: that Jesus is powerful, and that Jesus is merciful. That's about it. But that's what she focuses on. And based on this fledgling and imperfect faith, she refuses to give up even in the face of what appears to be his utter rejection of her. Clinging to her belief that Jesus *can* help and that he has a track record of being compassionate, she remains unshakable in her pursuit of his attention and hope for a positive answer to her plea.

And looking in on this scene from the outside, it's clear what Jesus is doing here: he's putting her faith to the test. Will she stick to it when he doesn't appear to hear her? She passes the test, as we know. But what about when we ourselves are tested in the same way? When it seems that the Lord is ignoring our prayers, are we as persistent as she? Do we pass the test of faith and remain hopeful? Or do we give up all too easily? Once again, I have to confess that I'm guilty. What about you?

Especially because it only gets worse. At length the woman's ceaseless petitions begin to irritate the disciples. And it's here that we have a little translation problem in the text. The way we heard it, it sounds like they want Jesus to send her away empty handed. And that is indeed one way to read it. But the Greek word that's translated "send away" has as its primary meaning "to untie, to set free, or to release". And based on Jesus' response, a more natural understanding of the text would be to assume that

the disciples have taken on her cause. Like the unjust judge in the parable of Jesus, they want him to grant her request simply because she's wearing them out with her constant nagging. It's not that they care that much about her problem, they're just thinking, "Some vacation this is going to be having to listen to her blubbing morning, noon, and night."

And so, it's in response to their request that Jesus essentially answers, "I can't do that. I can't help her because I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Now, you'd think that that would pretty much slam the door in her face. On the surface, it sounds like a blatantly racist statement – one that communicates pure contempt for anyone who is not of God's chosen nation Israel. And doubtless this woman has had her fill of being put down and despised by uppity Jews in the past. She's chafed under their insults and been resentful of their smug sense of superiority. The question is: in the face of such an insult, will she now give up her quest? Will she let her national pride stand in the way? Will she, like most of us probably would have done, storm off in a huff saying, "I'd rather be damned than take that kind of abuse from the likes of him?"

No. She doesn't. She passes the test; and in so doing she proves something. She proves that she is a true Israelite. As St. Paul explains in his letter to the Romans, it isn't those who are by bloodline and natural birth that belong to God's chosen people Israel; but rather those who share the faith of Abraham and the Patriarchs. Those who believe in the promises of God despite adversity, despite trials and hardship, and despite not seeing any sure sign of the promise being fulfilled and lacking any understanding of how the Lord could possibly bring them about—they are the true Israel of God. And this woman, by tenaciously sticking to her prayer proves that that's exactly who and what she is: a lost sheep of the house of Israel. And so it is precisely to her and to everyone else like her that Jesus has been sent.

She falls at the feet of Jesus and begins to worship him, *her* Lord. But her testing is not yet over with. Faith reaches its perfection in humility and the willingness to suffer to serve others. And so, Jesus places one more high hurdle before her: a stinging personal insult. "It's not right to take the children's bread and cast it to the dogs." And you'd better believe that that one had to hurt. But at the heart of it is the question "How do you see yourself before God?" Before she had used the plea common to beggars, "Lord, have mercy"; but, you know, it's easy to say the words without really meaning them or understanding what it is they imply; namely that we are one hundred percent dependent upon God's grace and mercy for everything, that without his underserved kindness and generosity we would have nothing, and that we are, properly speaking, unwashed beggars at his table – or rather stray dogs under it – all our lives.

Can you see yourself that way? This woman did. And she was confident that the Lord's table overflowed with such bounty that even the leftover scraps and dropped crumbs would be sufficient to satisfy all her needs. She told Jesus so. And so doing she passed the test with flying colors and became one of the very few people whose faith was commended by Jesus.

And, of course, the purpose of this story being recorded for us is that we too might seek to attain such praiseworthy faith and perseverance in prayer. Because it isn't the scraps and crumbs the Lord Jesus wants you to have. He wants you to sit at the table and enjoy the full feast of his grace. And by dealing with this woman the way he did, he was showing us, his disciples, exactly what should be our attitude in prayer, and

how we should hang on to his promises and trust in his compassion in spite of what we see and experience, and how we should tough it and show a proper sense of humility – precisely so that he can commend our faith and grant us the things we desire; for ourselves, sure; but more importantly for the others for whom we pray. Let's not miss that. This woman got pulled through the wringer, so to speak, not because she wanted something for herself; she did it for her daughter. She stuck it out and endured the humiliating insults to save her child – which demonstrates a mother's love, to be sure, but even more a love that in a small way reflects the love that Christ displayed for us when he was subject to humiliation, torture, and death to save us from our sin.

And he too, in his hour of deepest need, cried out in prayer to his heavenly Father – who seemed to ignore him, who seemed to reject him, who, as far as he could tell, only responded by turning up the heat of his fury; literally adding injury to insult. But Christ our Lord also clung to his faith in the Words and Promises of God despite everything he experienced. His faith too, was commended and his prayer ultimately answered.

What prayer is that? The one he even now prays for you: that your faith in him may become as strong and praiseworthy as that of this Canaanite woman's, that you may recognize your unworthiness and come to him in all humility – a beggar to his table – to receive from him the gifts of grace and forgiveness that will set you free of your bondage to sin, nourish your soul, and enable you to endure hardship and sacrificially serve others as he has served you. It's a pretty tall order. But it's one that our heavenly Father is eager to respond to. So, let's make this our unwavering and persistent prayer as well, for he will surely grant it to us for Jesus' sake. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!