

Matthew 15:21-28 | Lent 2

Rev. Jeff Hendrix | Faith Lutheran Church

Matthew 15:21-28

²¹Jesus left that place and withdrew into the region of Tyre and Sidon. ²²There a Canaanite woman from that territory came and kept crying out, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David! A demon is severely tormenting my daughter!"

²³But he did not answer her a word.

His disciples came and pleaded, "Send her away, because she keeps crying out after us."

²⁴He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

²⁵But she came and knelt in front of him, saying, "Lord, help me."

²⁶He answered her, "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."

²⁷"Yes, Lord," she said, "yet the dogs also eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

²⁸Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, your faith is great! It will be done for you, just as you desire." And her daughter was healed at that very hour.

Faith Persists by Promise, Not Experience

"A theologian sifted in Satan's sieve". So reads the epitaph, or an inscription on a memorial, of Paul Gerhardt. You may not recognize his name, but you know who he is. If you've ever sang, the Advent hymn: "O Lord, How Shall I Meet You;" the Christmas hymn: "O Jesus Christ Thy Manger Is;" Lent: "A Lamb goes uncomplaining forth;" "O sacred head, now wounded;" Easter: "Awake, my heart, with gladness;" and others like "If God Himself be for me."

Gerhardt has been called the best German hymn writer and the best Lutheran hymn writer; some of the most beautiful and comforting hymns both in message and in melody were written by him. He wrote 133 in all and we're going to sing two hymns by Gerhardt later this morning.

But it's incredibly surprising that he wrote them, because his life was full of suffering. His epitaph was very fitting; Satan was allowed to sift him thoroughly in his sieve (cf. Luke 22:31).

Both his parents died before he was 20. He was a pastor during the Thirty Years' War in Germany. Violence, greed, rape, looting and plague were the norm, not the exception. Whole towns and churches lost 2/3 of their populations. Gerhardt as a pastor would conduct multiple funerals per day. Gerhardt's own home and city church had been destroyed by fire from the war. He was deposed as pastor in one town because he refused to stop calling false teaching 'false teaching.' He suffered personally as well. He married his wife Anna in 1655. Their first child died in infancy. They had three sons and two daughters, but only one son survived his parents. Paul's wife Anna died after only 13 years of marriage.

With so many troubles and sufferings, how and why would someone persist in the faith like that? It would seem natural to question if God was real, or at least question if God really cared, or even answered prayer, if He allowed all of that to happen to us.

Yet Paul Gerhardt continued to proclaim God's love and mercy to him in spite of all of Satan's attempts to sift him and get him to abandon God. He understood that his *experience* told him one thing, that God didn't seem to care; but that God's *promises* told him something else, that God had shown him endless mercy in Christ. The proof of God's love and mercy was not to be found in his experience, but in God's promises.

This is the very lesson that we see today in our Gospel narrative.

In our text, a woman comes to Jesus whose daughter is severely demon-possessed and she cries out, she begs Jesus for help. But He doesn't say a thing. And then His disciples try to get Him to send her away because she's just a gentile woman, she wasn't worthy to be near Jesus. And Jesus seems to agree with them, saying, *"I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."*

Experience would have told this Canaanite woman that Jesus didn't care. He ignored her. He tells her He wasn't sent for her. And then, He calls her a dog! Experience would tell her that God didn't care. Experience would tell her to just "give up and go home."

And she would have, had she not listened carefully to Jesus' words: Jesus said, *"I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."*

But she came and knelt in front of him, saying, "Lord, help me."

He answered her, "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."

"Yes, Lord," she said, "yet the dogs also eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." What do these words mean?

Our cats have a feeding time. They usually get fed about the same time we're sitting down for a meal, whether breakfast, lunch or supper. To say that our cats are a little impatient is an understatement. They've figured out that anything that falls on the ground is theirs. So they'll jump up on the counter as we're preparing a meal and flick something off, and they'll eat it once it falls to the ground. They get their food before the scheduled time.

When Jesus says, *"It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs,"* the woman recognizes that yes, Jesus had not so subtly called her a dog, while his disciples were the children, but she also recognized what dogs do.

Dogs, especially puppies (or like our cats), sometimes get tiny bits of food even before it's their time. They eat some scraps which fall from the table before it's their time to eat. The Canaanite woman recognizes the "way out" in Jesus' parable. And she seizes it. She stops Jesus' in His words and she holds Him to it. She holds Jesus to His promise.

The disciples and the Jews were who Jesus, the Messiah, was sent to first. He needs to deal with them and instruct them now. Jesus is the Savior to the Gentiles too - but it wasn't their time yet. The woman recognized that Jesus was in the middle of a "meal" with His disciples, so to speak; He was in the middle of His work with them, and she didn't want to interrupt that. So she simply would be content if some of that - some of the grace and blessing of Jesus - would "fall off the table" to her, the dog. That way she could eat her tiny bite at the same time.

The woman didn't trust her experience. If she were to have believed the experiences of her life - the suffering of her daughter, being ignored by Jesus and called a dog - she would have concluded that God didn't listen to prayers, that God did not care for her, and that He was not interested in her salvation. Instead, she trusted Jesus' words, His promises, and she clung to them. She knew that Jesus, even though He was sent first to the Jews, was her Savior also - even though He didn't appear to be. She knew that Jesus still cared for her and would give her exactly what was best - even though she wasn't experiencing that at the moment, and in fact, was being allowed to suffer.

You may have heard this past week about the passing of Billy Graham. Billy Graham was called by many "America's Pastor." He was a man full of integrity and cared deeply about spreading the Gospel. He was a successful entrepreneur and evangelist, it was estimated he spoke to more people directly - about 215 million - than any person in history. And he preached about Christ, which God used to bring many people to faith through the Gospel. We are thankful to God for His work through Graham. But Graham was in many ways the exact opposite of Paul Gerhardt; where Gerhardt experienced suffering, Graham experienced success. Where Gerhardt lost his position because he proclaimed the truth, Graham had a dangerous false teaching that in some ways led to his success:

He would hold massive rallies, called crusades - attended by a couple million people at a time. They were moving, emotional experiences. At the end of the crusades, he would call people forward to make a "decision" to follow Christ. Even though he was sharing Christ, his emphasis was put on the person and their experience and something they did for God rather than the promises of Christ and what God had done for them.

What would happen to many who had just had this amazing experience where they "felt" God working, they would leave and a few hours, days, weeks or years later, that "feeling" would be gone. They had experienced a spiritual high. But the thing is with 'highs' is that there's always a crash, a low. So there were many who would travel long distances to go back again and again to the crusades just so they could have the same spiritual feeling again, and they would end up making another "decision" for Christ - sometimes again, and again, and again... Many were always left with the *doubt* whether or not their *experience* was genuine. That's what makes false teaching so dangerous; it leads people to put their trust and faith in themselves and their own experience, rather than in Christ and His promises.

That's not to say Graham or those who followed him aren't in heaven. Only by God's grace and because of Christ's love and promise to them - not because of any promise *they* made to God, and certainly not because of anything they did, taught, or experienced - does God give someone the inheritance of heaven as a free gift. But it's God's Word and *promises* which give us that confidence, not *experience*.

Because we, like the Canaanite woman, don't live in spiritual highs, we *do* and *will* experience suffering. God, according to what we experience, may *seem* far away from us. Satan, as we saw last week, uses our experiences. He takes advantage of lows in our life to try to get us to doubt and forsake God: "Did you really experience your conversion? Are you really saved? Have you done enough? How do you know? Did God really say?" Experience makes us doubt and leads away from Christ.

But God's promise is that He doesn't leave us - even if our spiritual high is gone, and even if we are tempted to abandon him. God does not abandon us. Even if our church never sees the success that Graham's crusades did, even if it is burnt to the ground as Gerhardt's was, God's promises never fail.

God promises to save regardless of how we feel. That's the most freeing promise of all, because it frees us to be sad or troubled and to know that God still loves and cares for us.

God promises that when two or three poor, miserable sinners are gathered around the means of grace, He is with them. God has given you Baptism to assure you that He has saved you, that

He has joined you to Christ, so you don't have to doubt whether or not you've accepted Christ, because we know in Christ, God has accepted you. He has given us the Lord's Supper; "He has bestowed upon you His holy body and blood, whereby He has made full satisfaction for all your sins, [He] strengthens and preserves you in the true faith unto life everlasting." And He gives you His Word which declare His promises, His promise that because of Christ, you are saved. Through these objective means, Christ gives you persistent faith.

Sometimes, God, in letting us experience lows, in seemingly not answering our prayers is actually doing what is best for us. God may need to push us, as Jesus did to the women in our Gospel, to allow us to experience sufferings for a little while, to have things not go our way, in order to get our faith out of our experience and in His Word and promises.

We find God not in our subjective experiences and when things go our way, but in His objective Word and Sacraments. Experience lies, and the devil who loves to use our experience is the prince of lies. God's Word doesn't lie. It doesn't deceive. It doesn't change. It's here where our forgiveness, life, salvation, and the strength to face our daily crosses, comes from.

"Woman, your faith is great! It will be done for you, just as you desire." Jesus finally said to the woman when she clung to His Word. This is God's will (1 Thess 4:1-7). Not to give you happy experiences, but to test your faith in order that it may be refined and strengthened, to make your faith persist until He brings you to heaven. Satan will try to sift us, but God's promises never fail.

Let Paul Gerhardt in our hymns later this morning remind you of God's promise. Let me read two verses now:

Why should cross and trial grieve me?
Christ is near With His cheer;
Never will He leave me.
Who can rob me of the heaven?
That God's Son For me won When His life was given?

God gives me my days of gladness, And I will
Trust Him still When He sends me sadness.
God is good; His love attends me
Day by day, Come what may,
Guides me and defends me.

Amen.