

August 20, 2017

Faith That Refuses to Take No for An Answer

PRAYER

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Heavenly Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. AMEN

SERMON

This may well be one of the most difficult passages we ever have to deal with as Christians. This is a difficult text because it is so out of character with the Jesus we know and love. The Jesus who always has his arms wide open for people who are struggling, for people who are in dire straits. This woman comes to Jesus seeking his mercy and compassion not for herself but for her daughter, her precious child. The little girl is possessed by a demon that is wreaking havoc on her life. And the mother comes to Jesus both hoping and believing that he can and will grant healing to her little girl. As she comes to Jesus she shows great courage and faith. Courage because she is a Canaanite, she is a foreigner in faith because she has the audacity to believe that Jesus can and will cast the demon out of her little girl.

But as she comes the response of Jesus is troubling. First of all, is his silence. He simply ignores her. And then when the disciples urge him to send her away because she is being such a pest shouting after them. He tells her that, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." When she persists it gets even worse. Jesus responds rather bristly, "It's not right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Now I don't know about you but if that had been me coming to Jesus seeking his mercy and compassion for my child, I probably would have said something like, "Up yours, Jesus!" (laughter) Accompanied by the IGGY, you know the international gesture of good will. (Laughter)

But not this woman. Instead of lashing out at Jesus, she turns the tables on him. Saying, "Yes Lord even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table." This woman has what the Finns call *sisu*, what the Jews call *hutzpah*, what we might call 'unmitigated Gaul.' Whatever you want to call it, she has it. Now we don't know if Jesus sensed the depth of her faith and courage or not. All we do know is that seeing her great faith, he uses it as a teaching moment. A moment to teach his disciples about the breadth of God's grace and mercy.

You know back in the beginning of salvation history when God makes his covenant with Abraham. He promises Abraham that through his descendants all the nations of the world will be blessed. Unfortunately, during the period of Jewish history, known as the Babylonian captivity, that broad understanding of God's mercy and love was lost. When the Jews returned to the homeland, Ezra, Nehemiah, the High Priest, and the Governor set about enacting some reforms to protect the purity of God's chosen people. As a result of those reforms, all the foreigners who had settled in the land during the period of that exile were forced to pack up and leave.

Now many of these people who had come in and settled had intermarried with the Jews who had been left behind. So as a result of these reforms, families were being torn apart. Mother, father, child. It didn't matter. If you weren't 100% Hebrew, you had to go and there were no exceptions. It was during the period of that reconstruction of Jerusalem, during the period of Ezra and Nehemiah that the wonderful little book of Jonah was written. And the book is written as a way of calling attention to the narrowmindedness of this way of thinking. And was also a call to remember that in the covenant that God made with Abraham and thus with all Israel. It was through them that all the nations of the world are to be blessed.

You probably know the story of Jonah. The Bible's most reluctant prophet. God commands Jonah to go to Nineveh to speak his word to the Ninevites. Jonah immediately tries to run away from God. He doesn't want to go. What he does is jump on the first ship he finds headed to Tarshish which is exact opposite direction. But as Jonah is soon to find out. It's kind of hard to run away from God.

And while they are at sea God causes a great storm to rise up against the ship. The ship and the crew are in peril. And when Jonah confesses that he's the reason for the storm. Sailors cast him overboard where he is swallowed not by a whale but by a giant fish. As in the belly of the fish for three days. And while he is in the belly of the fish, Jonah prays this marvelous, beautiful prayer. But it is so out of character with his actions. That it makes the fish so sick it pukes him up on the shore near Nineveh. It is only then that Jonah gets it through his thick skull that you better go because he really doesn't have any other choice.

And so rather begrudgingly he becomes obedient to God's commands and goes to Nineveh. But once he gets to Nineveh, he gives a minimal effort. His whole prophesy consists of eight words. "After 40 days, Nineveh shall fall." That's his whole prophesy. Amazingly, the people of Nineveh repent in mass putting on ashes and sack cloth. Repenting and God shows them mercy. Now you would think that any preacher would be wildly ecstatic if there was that kind of a mass response to his preaching. Not Jonah.

Jonah is peeved at God and he is angry at God. And he tells God, "I knew it, I knew that if they repented you would have mercy on them." He is mad. But that story shows that there is a breadth to God's mercy and love that is far greater than that of God's people. And that breadth of mercy and love is present throughout Jesus' ministry with the one exception of this Canaanite woman.

Jesus is always opening his arms to bring hope and healing to those who are just possessed, to those who are powerless, to those who are down and out. And Jesus canonizes that broad perspective of God's mercy and love. When he gives the great commission to his disciples, and through them to the church, and to you and me. To go into the world to make disciples of all people. Jesus gives the disciples and he commands each and every one of us to go into the world breaking down barriers that separate us from one another. Breaking down barriers so that together we could all experience the mercy and love of God.

But instead of being faithful to that calling all too often. When we go instead of tearing down barriers we make barriers or at least try to create boundaries on the mercy and love of God. We will accept people into our midst who are like us, who look like us, think like us, talk like us but don't expect us to change anything about ourselves to welcome and embrace those who are different than us.

And Jesus weeps. Because you see in the end Jesus does embrace this Canaanite woman with his compassion, and love, and mercy. And gives her the miracle of the healing of her daughter that she so desperately yearns to have. When will we ever learn? When will we every fully understand that God's grace, God's mercy, God's love is boundless? It is far greater than we could ever imagine or understand. When will we respond to this boundless love of God given to us in the death and resurrection of Christ? That is given to us first. And it sends us out into the world to share it with the stranger in our midst. So that together with one another, we might experience this gracious love of God.

Jesus marveled at the woman's faith. A faith that refused to take no for an answer. He used her as an example to show us that God's love is not limited to us or people like us. It is a love and a mercy for all people and that love should be there to inspire us. That we take it with us into the world. Welcoming the stranger in our midst.

PRAYER

May that peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. AMEN