



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott E. Schul

11th Sunday after Pentecost: August 16, 2020

Sermon Title: “Boldly, persistently, courageously...”

Gospel Text: Matthew 15:21-28

Have you ever asked Jesus for something? I mean *really asked* Jesus, *implored* Jesus, even *begged* Jesus for something? I want you to step into the shoes of the Canaanite woman who is at the heart of today’s Gospel lesson. I want you to imagine yourself in her place. And to do that, you need to revisit a time in your life when you desperately needed a blessing from Jesus. Maybe it was during your service in the military, and you begged Jesus to keep you alive in a battle. Maybe it was at a time when you were out of money, and you begged Jesus to provide a roof over your head and food to eat. Maybe it was after you or a loved one received a devastating diagnosis from a doctor, and you begged Jesus to provide healing and a cure.

If you can remember a time like that or imagine what that feels like, then you can identify with the Canaanite woman in today’s Gospel. Her daughter was tormented by a demon. The daughter’s personality had surely undergone a terrifying transformation. She wasn’t herself anymore. Her future – even her life – was all at risk, and this mother was desperate. She had tried everything within her power to fix the situation, heal her daughter, and bring an end to this horrifying chapter. But nothing worked. She was out of ideas... out of options... and nearly out of hope.

Desperate times call for desperate measures. We know what that’s like, don’t we? If your problem is serious enough, you’ll look in *any* corner, under *any* rock for a solution. That’s what the Canaanite woman did. She turned to a most unlikely source – a stranger – a Jew from Galilee – Jesus of Nazareth. Canaanites and Jews had a longstanding adversarial relationship. They were historic enemies. What was Jesus even doing there, far outside of his home base, wandering the coastal region of what today we’d call Lebanon? Matthew’s Gospel offers no explanation.

But I don’t think it’s ever an accident when Jesus shows up. There he was, and the Canaanite woman wasn’t going to miss any opportunity – however unlikely or crazy it seemed – if there was even the sliver of a possibility that it would bring healing to her daughter. Somehow the mother knew that Jesus claimed to be the Son of God - the very Messiah himself. Could it be true? If so, *he* could heal her daughter, change their lives, and even change the world! And so with nothing left to lose, she boldly, persistently, and courageously shouted after him: “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.”

When our backs are up against the wall, when we are out of options, and when we make our last and most desperate plea to Jesus for relief, we can easily fall into one of two traps. The *first one* is that even before our prayer has exited our lungs, we give up any hope that Jesus will

hear us, respond to us, or care about our need. Have you ever felt that way? It's an easy trap to fall into, especially if you think Jesus views your relationship like an accounting ledger. After all, *you know* you've been lax in your prayers. *You know* that you've been lax in your church participation. *You know* you've not fully satisfied the demands of God's Law. In the face of all those inadequacies, you calculate that you have fallen short, and so you conclude that Jesus will ignore both your prayer and your needs.

It would have been very easy for the Canaanite woman to fall into this trap. What thing of any merit did could *she* offer Jesus? After all, as I've already noted, she was a *Canaanite* – a people long considered enemies by the Jews. She was also a *woman*, and we know that women in that day and age were marginalized and even treated as property, with few rights. All of those awful cultural biases seemed present, like a forbidding wall. Her first call to Jesus was met with stony silence. Then his disciples urged him to send her away. And then Jesus himself stated that she had no entitlement to his blessing and was as insignificant as a house pet.

I'll confess that Jesus's response makes me uncomfortable. This is not the Jesus who invites sinners to dinner, who calls little children closer, and who heals the sick. But I must concede that he is speaking the truth to the Canaanite woman. *Jesus owes her nothing*. The same is true for us. *Jesus owes us nothing*. None of us are capable of doing enough works to *merit* Jesus's blessing. It reminds me of a famous Luther story. At his death, they cleaned out his pockets and found a scrap of paper on which he had written a few sentences. The very last sentence was this: "We are beggars. It is true." Yes, friends, as painful as it is for me to admit, we are mere beggars, and Jesus owes us nothing. But that didn't stop the Canaanite woman from asking, and it should not stop you from praying like she did: boldly, persistently, courageously, trusting in Christ alone.

The *other trap* we fall into when we pray is that we put so much value in our own goodness that we come to Jesus with *a sense of entitlement*. We somehow think that because we've been faithful in one or two things, Jesus now owes us. This too is painful for us to admit, but *we've all done it*. We've all bargained with Jesus by highlighting the few things we did well and overlooking all of the other things, in the hope that we can convince him to reward us by granting our request. At some level it must amuse Jesus that we think we can purchase his blessings with our meager and tragically incomplete set of good works.

And so hear me once again: *Jesus owes us nothing*. None of us are capable of doing enough good works to deserve Jesus's blessing. The Canaanite woman knew that *she* had no works of value to offer Jesus and no status or entitlement to his favor. But that didn't stop her from asking, and it should not stop you from praying like she did: boldly, persistently, courageously, trusting in Christ alone.

Eventually, Jesus *did* grant the woman's request and healed her daughter. So why didn't he just do that the first time she asked? *Because he wanted to reveal to his disciples, and to his followers then and now, what true faith looks like*. True faith was revealed in a Canaanite woman - an outsider of so little worldly significance that we don't even know her name. But she is our *example* – the person Martin Luther called a heroine – a *courageous teacher* of "the true character and virtue of faith."¹

This is why the Church so carefully preserved this story, even though the disciples come across as knuckleheads and Jesus seems a little cold. The Church knew from the very beginning that the story of the Canaanite woman was priceless because it demonstrates what real faith looks like. The Canaanite woman did not surrender to *despair* because of how the world devalued her. She did not surrender to *hopelessness* when Jesus was silent or seemed dismissive. And she didn't invest her hope in her own merits, works, or righteousness. In humility she invested *everything*: her heart, her hope, and her trust – in *Christ alone*. She is our example of faith. She is our assurance that Christ hears *everyone*, without exception.

One final note... *Jesus is not a vending machine*. Just because we ask for something doesn't mean we'll get *what we want* or that it'll happen *when we want*. But in my experience Jesus has always given me what I *needed*, just *when* I needed it. Part of trusting Jesus is trusting that *Jesus* knows what's best for me, and that *his* timing will always be wiser than my own. So friends, keep praying, just like that Canaanite woman: boldly, persistently, courageously, trusting in Christ alone – a Christ who in the end blesses us not because we are deserving, but because he loves us lavishly, inexhaustibly, and eternally. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Citations

¹ LW 67, p. 253; LW 76, p. 378.