

## Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time: August 20, 2017

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### **“CURE OF THE CANAANITE WOMAN’S DAUGHTER”**

It has been a long day in a long week in a long month and finally Jesus sits to rest in a place where no one knows his name. The chapters and verses immediately preceding Matthew 15:21-28 are full of action and ministry. Any human being would be weary, and Jesus certainly is human. Grief, crowds, the doubt of others and the constant press of humanity and needs have been constant companions.

Not for lack of trying, Jesus has not had a moment’s rest since hearing of John the Baptist’s death. When he went out to mourn, crowds pursued him. Abandoning his needs to meet theirs, Jesus taught, healed and fed them. Seeking solitude a second time, Jesus sends his disciples ahead by boat. Interrupted by a storm, Jesus walks to them on the water and calms their anxieties. When the group returns to shore, more people have gathered seeking healing. Throughout all the action, the disciples are consistently missing the point, lacking in faith, while the Pharisees find every opportunity to challenge Jesus’ teaching and practice.

Hoping that distance will provide him with enough anonymity to rest, grieve and connect with his disciples, Jesus makes a third attempt to find peace and respite, leading his disciples out of Galilee to the region of Tyre and Sidon. It is not to be; not half a breath after Jesus arrives, a woman comes out calling for help, “Son of David!”

What a relatable moment. Just as he sits down and exhales, another need presents itself. The boss brings in one more project on Friday afternoon. The baby cries just as your head hits the pillow. One more bill comes in on the last week of the month. The doctor wants to run one more test. The dishwasher beeps, the check engine light comes on, that bum knee starts hurting again. The resources of time and energy have run out before the needs. Human like us, in all things but sin, Jesus’ weariness is palpable in his silence. The son of Mary and Joseph may be a bit tired of answering to “Son of David.”

The Canaanite woman has also been living long days in long weeks in long months. For her life has been seizures, soiled linens, anxiety, illness and the constant needs of a dependent child. We know nothing of her story beyond her identity as the parent of a

sick child, but that tells us a lot. We can safely assume she is worried. She may have spent much of her money on treatments and searching for cures. We can guess she has begged for a cure from every god she knows. Maybe she wonders what she might have done to cause this illness. She is also a woman of hope. A tenacious advocate on behalf of her daughter and unwilling to leave any avenue to a healing unexplored.

And she sets out to find this Son of David – a Jewish miracle worker who has healed many, who fed thousands, stilled a storm and walked on water. Surely, he can help. If not him, who.

Maybe you are living long days in long weeks in long months and are weary. Maybe you are seeking rest and peace. A moment or place on the outskirts of life to put down titles that are too large and needs that are too great. Burdened with the demands of decisions, chores and addictions to be kicked, or bills to be paid, we lose strength. Limited by our titles: mom, dad, son, daughter, teacher, nurse, doctor, officer, entrepreneur or coach, we lose ourselves.

We can identify with Jesus as he sits, silent in the face of one more request. Maybe she will just go away. If we grant Jesus's exhaustion, ignoring the request for help makes some sense. Yet, he is unwilling to send her away as the disciples wish him to. The Canaanite woman makes her approaches and begs, "Lord, help me."

Here things get a little ugly and if we were to be gracious, we would say that Jesus is not being his best self. *Frankly*, he tells her, *I did not come for you or your daughter.* Jesus? Did he just say that? Did he just call that woman a dog? Scholars have debated what to do with this interchange for a long time.

History buffs say the exchange is not that offensive at all when viewed contextually. It is simply an example of the clever back and forth banter common in biblical times. Moreover, we should consider it positive that Jesus is willing to engage with a foreigner and a woman. The insult is actually very inclusive. Greek experts will point out that the word translated as 'dogs' in English indicates not a street dog of mongrel, but a 'little puppy' or favorite lap dog.

Historical and literary scholarship aside, the exchange is jarring. A woman, in need and of good faith, has approached Jesus and asked for help for her child and finds herself rebuffed and insulted, even if gently insulted. Let's stop for a moment explaining away via textual analysis. Let's stop for a moment and see here, Jesus, *human like us in all things but sin*, having a human moment. Overwhelmed, overtired and overdrawn. We can relate to him. It is hard to be your best self when you are weary. It is hard to remember at all times, the love and grace we are called to show. We fall and we fail and forget who we are, at our core, in the eyes of God.

In her humility and patience (maybe born from her experience of dealing with an overtired and sick child) she does not react; she does not bristle at the insult or disagree with the rebuke. Rather in faith, she turns it around. Folding the insult in on itself, she reminds Jesus that even the dogs have their place in the household. Even those who are the least have their needs met.

Through the prophet Isaiah, God declared, “*The foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, ministering to him, loving the name of the LORD, and becoming his servants—all who keep the Sabbath free from profanation and hold to my covenant, them I will bring to my holy mountain and make joyful in my house of prayer.*” The woman gets it right and gives Jesus hope that someone is listening and someone gets it. She pays Jesus homage, calls him by his Messianic title, and confesses her faith in him. A faith not even his disciples have fully grasped yet. Having never met Jesus, she still believes what he can do with just a word.

The faith of an outsider reminds Jesus of his identity, the promises of God’s goodness and his ministry to spread the Good News. Ignoring his protests and seemingly self-imposed limitations, the Canaanite mother publicly and gently calls Jesus to expand his ministry to all of God’s people, not simply the lost sheep of Israel. Moved by this faith and reminded of his identity, Jesus replies with affection and affirmation. “O woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” Step back and think about what she has done for a moment. Not only has she secured healing for her child, but also, by her faith, she has ministered to Jesus.

May we all have someone as gracious in our moments of weakness; someone to remind us who we are beyond name and title.

From time to time, all of us find ourselves outmatched by tasks and responsibilities. Our sighs are deep and exhaustions real. Rest and peace, cures and wholeness may seem unattainable. But as Saint Paul says in the Letter to the Romans, “the gifts and call of God are irrevocable.” We hold a promise of abundant life through faith, a promise of peace beyond all understanding and we have a God who knows our weariness, toil and struggle and who draws near to us when we reach out in humility and faith.