

*Reminiscere*  
Matthew 15:21-28

The Christian life is not easy. I've been trying to express that in different ways over the years. In preparing for today's sermon, I ran across a quote that expresses it perfectly. It's from C.F.W. Walther's sermon on the same Gospel text we heard today. Here it is:

"Many suppose that when a person is converted, he can take it easy, like someone who has finally arrived in a safe harbor after a stormy voyage. The danger of being lost has passed. His soul is forever safe and need never fear shipwreck. This, however, is an extremely dangerous deception. When a person is finally converted, it is then that the battle really begins. When Christ says, 'Strive to enter through the narrow door,' He means with not only the first repentance but with the whole Christian life until death. All this taken together is the narrow way that leads to life."<sup>1</sup>

The Christian life is one of struggle. We struggle against sin, death, and the devil. Surprisingly, we also struggle against God like the Canaanite woman in our text today.

First, Jesus ignores her.

She calls him Lord and Son of David.

Is this too familiar a title? After all, she's not Jewish. We've lost sense of this in America except for in the South where formality is still important. In the south my wife would never be known as "Erin," but only as Mrs. Maggard except to the closest of friends. For someone else to call her Erin would be an insult of the highest impropriety. Or, at least, that's the way it used to be. That sounds funny to our California ears and, in some ways, that's a shame.

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<sup>1</sup> Walther's Works, Gospel Sermons: Volume 1, C.F.W. Walther, pg. 167

Is the Canaanite's "Lord" addressed to the wrong person? If we still used the title "Lord" to refer to those above us, we might address our President that way, but it would be odd to address President Putin that way!

Whatever the reason, Jesus ignores the Canaanite woman. But she seems to cry out all the more because Jesus' disciples beg Jesus to do something about the woman. Jesus responds with "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

This isn't the only time that Jesus makes such a statement. Earlier in Matthew, when Jesus sent out the twelve, He says, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." (Mt 10:5-6) When talking with the woman at the well, Jesus says "salvation is from the Jews." (Jn 4:22)

But the Samaritan woman is not deterred by Jesus' words. She falls down prostrate in front of Jesus and says, "help me!" Jesus responds by calling her a dog: "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." (v. 26) To be fair, Jesus calls her the diminutive form for dog, so it's not as harsh as dog, but it's still harsh. Jesus calls her little dog.

The woman struggles with Jesus like Jacob did or like Job did. Man struggling with God is nothing new. God struggled with Jacob to make him firm in the promises that God had given him. God struggled with Job to test him and show his faith was genuine. Remember that the devil is God's devil. He's on a leash. He can only do what God permits. Thankfully, God puts bounds on evil in the world or we would all be doomed.

You may have to struggle with God.

It may be a period of validation or testing. Or it could be for other reasons.

For instance, drowning the old man in the waters of baptism is not optional. There's no taking it easy as a Christian. There's no safe harbor this side of glory. That's where we are destined in the end, but it's at the end and not right now. Drowning the old man is not easy. Examining yourself against the ten commandments can be really painful. And sometimes, you may even have to tell the old man "no!" God will not allow us to forego drowning the old man and may help us to do so whether we want to or not because He loves us and doesn't want us trapped in our sin.

Or it could be a cross God has put into your life. Jesus promises us persecution and a cross, yet we never seem happy when God puts a cross on us. God tells us that He does this so that we are conformed to the image of His Son. (Rom 8:29) The way of Jesus is the way of the cross. We shouldn't be surprised when God gives us our crosses to bear.

Or it could be we invite demons into our lives. Demons are real and scary. As baptized Christians, they have no authority over you unless you invite them in. You invite them in by sinning. We seem far too comfortable playing around with sin. We partake of pornography. Or consume violence. Or partake of fornication or adultery. And expect to remain unscathed. God is not mocked. You reap what you sew.

Whatever the reason, we find ourselves in a position where it seems like God is ignoring us. Or God is blocking our plans. Or God is against us. It seemed like that for the Canaanite woman, but she persists: "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." (v. 27) She catches Jesus in His words according to Luther and Walther. She isn't trying to take the children's bread. She only wants the scraps that fall from the table. She knows that a scrap is enough.

And Jesus marvels at her faith: "O woman, great is your faith!"

This Canaanite woman is indeed a great example of faith.

She persists even when Jesus seems to ignore her. She knows that Jesus is the only one who can help her. He's the only one who can help any of us. Jesus caused quite a stir in John 6 when He said that we must eat His body and drink His blood. Many of His disciples left Him. It gets so bad, Jesus even asks His apostles if they want to go. Peter's response is perfect: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life!" (Jn 6:68) Peter also confesses in Acts 4: "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:12)

So, we go to Jesus for salvation. But Jesus isn't walking around Jerusalem and Galilee and Samaria today. He promises to be in His preached Word and in His Holy Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. If we look for Him other places, we will not find him there. But He promises to be there "for us" in His Word and Sacraments.

The Canaanite woman persists even when Jesus implies, she is not of the household of faith. She knows that Jesus can make children of Abraham out of rocks. Jesus must come and fulfill all the promises made to the Jews. Only after He finishes His work does He give us the so-called great commission: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations..." (Mt 28:19) God promised salvation to the nations beforehand in the Old Testament, but it was always through the house of Israel. Now the church is the house of Israel. Now the bride of Christ isn't only the children of Israel, but it is composed of all nations in the church. (Rev 7:9) All of us who put our trust in Jesus are children of Abraham! You are His chosen people!

The Canaanite woman persists even when Jesus calls her a little dog. In a way all of us must be comfortable with Jesus calling us dogs. Dogs in the ancient world weren't pets. They didn't see dogs in the affectionate way that many of us see our pets. You must know that you're a dog, that is, you're full of sin:

“For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.” (Mk 7:21-23) Jesus also says, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.” (Mk 2:17) You must agree with Jesus that you are a sinner and in need of help. You too are a little dog.

Little dogs deserve mercy not because they are cute or deserving but because God has promised it. I love how Psalm 23 expresses it: “God leads me in paths of righteousness for His name’s sake.” (v. 3) God puts His name on you in your baptism. He will not forsake His own name. He will not let His name falter or fail. He will uphold His name.

Today is *reminiscere* Sunday. It is Latin and taken from the first word of the introit, “remember your mercy, O Lord, and Your steadfast love.” We implore God to remember His mercy and steadfast love. We don’t depend on how well we are or aren’t doing, but we depend solely on God’s grace!

But that doesn’t mean you won’t sometimes wrestle with God. That doesn’t mean you won’t have a cross to bear. That doesn’t mean you won’t be persecuted to one degree or another. When that happens, remember the example of the Canaanite woman:

Cling to Jesus in faith.

Cling to Him even when it seems He doesn’t hear you.

Cling to Him even when it seems He’s wrestling with you.

Cling to Him even when it seems He calls you a little dog.

Cling to Jesus and He will vindicate you!