

Reminiscere
Matthew 15:21-28

There's a great quote in the movie *Princess Bride*. The dread pirate Roberts has kidnapped the princess bride Buttercup from the prince, who incidentally wants to assassinate her to start a war. Buttercup exclaims that Roberts mocks her pain. He says: "Life is pain, Highness. Anyone who says differently is selling something." This is one of those times where art reveals a great truth about life. Life is pain!

In other words, the Christian life isn't easy. C.F.W. Walther's sermon on the same Gospel text we heard today has a great quote which you also heard last year:

"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."¹

The Christian life is one of struggle. We struggle against sin, death, and the devil. This struggle continues until we die and even intensifies upon our deathbed. The picture of Jesus at Gethsemane sweating blood over the torments to come is similar when we sweat over the prospect of death in our own flesh. It is very fitting that we have this image of Jesus at Gethsemane at church. The Divine Service is meant to prepare us for death, but not a death we need to fear, but a death in Christ. But the devil, the world, and your old man will struggle against you so that you die in misery and not in the comfort of the blood of Christ.

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

We expect these struggles. Or we should. Often we try to distract ourselves with diversions or pleasures, but at some point, death will not allow you to be diverted. And you must learn to be like the Canaanite woman and catch Jesus in His words. You see we also struggle with God. Just like the Jacob in our Old Testament reading or just like the Canaanite woman in our Gospel text today. Jacob wrestled with God physically and the Canaanite woman wrestled with God verbally.

The Canaanite woman has heard about Jesus. She is a Gentile, and worse a Canaanite, yet she has heard about the Messiah and expects Him to come. When she hears that Jesus is near she comes and cries out: "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon." (v. 22)

And Jesus ignores her.

Can you imagine how infuriating this would be? I can't think of a meaner way to totally dismiss someone. It's aggravating if someone doesn't hear you, but if someone ignores you on purpose! Jesus treats this woman as if she doesn't exist!

But the Canaanite woman 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." (v. 24)

It's not as bad as we thought. It's worse. Not only is Jesus refusing to acknowledge the woman, but now He makes it clear that He's not there to help her! The Israelites He's taking a break from by coming into the district of Tyre and Sidon have a right to expect something from Jesus. He's their Messiah and God, after all. But who is this Canaanite? Apparently no one Jesus is willing to help! Can you imagine how crushing this would be? Any human rejection we might have experienced looks like nothing when rejection appears to come from God Himself!

But the Samaritan woman is not deterred by Jesus' words. She falls down prostrate in front of Jesus and says, "help me!" (v. 25) She's completely broken down. She's completely humiliated. The only thing she can imagine is "help me!"

And what does Jesus do? He responds by calling her a dog: "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." (v. 26) And you would think it couldn't get worse but Jesus increases her pain. He simply calls her a 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 him to do. Thankfully, God puts bounds on evil in the world or we would all be doomed.

At some point in your life or even many times, you will 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. Do any of us like to be humiliated? Yet God will not allow us to forego drowning the old man. If we refuse to examine ourselves, God will struggle with us 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 crosses to bear.

Or it could be that you invite demons into your 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 violence or gossip or some other kind of shame or vice. And we expect to remain unscathed. God is not mocked. You reap what you sow.

Whatever the reason, you find yourself in a position where it seems like God is ignoring you. It may seem like Jesus doesn't hear you, or Jesus doesn't care about you. Or it may even seem like Jesus calls you a dog! 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)

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 in 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 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 dog.

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!

You will struggle in life. You certainly wrestle with the devil, the world, and your flesh. And you will even wrestle with God. I love how Walther describes this: “[God] does not struggle against Christians in order to conquer but to be conquered by them.”² We conquer God with His Word. This is how Luther describes it: “This [Gospel reading] was written for all our comfort and instruction, so that we may know how deeply God hides His grace from us, so that we would not consider Him according to our perception and thinking but strictly according to His Word.”³

When you struggle with the devil, the world, your flesh, or even God, remember this Canaanite woman. She caught Jesus with His Word, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” (v. 27) You catch Jesus with His Word, “Yes Lord, I am a sinner, but I am baptized!” with all that baptism means! And Jesus can’t help but save you!

² *ibid.* pg. 74

³ AE76 Church Postil II, pg. 380
