

Second Sunday in Lent; March 5, 2023  
+ Matthew 15:21-28 +  
"Jesus Feeds Tenacious Faith"

**Jesus left that place and withdrew into the region of Tyre and Sidon. There a Canaanite woman from that territory came and kept crying out, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David! A demon is severely tormenting my daughter!"**

**But he did not answer her a word.**

**His disciples came and pleaded, "Send her away, because she keeps crying out after us."**

**He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."**

**But she came and knelt in front of him, saying, "Lord, help me."**

**He answered her, "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to their little dogs."**

**"Yes, Lord," she said, "yet their little dogs also eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."**

**Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, your faith is great! It will be done for you, just as you desire." And her daughter was healed from that very hour.**

The score was 6-0 at halftime. Our best player, Tucker, was sick. Our excellent goalie, Austin, was on vacation. What was left of the St. Paul Lutheran soccer team I was coaching was a hodgepodge of minimally skilled players who were getting their clock cleaned. As the first half clock ticked down, I had to think of something to say to them at halftime. What kind of pep talk should I give them? I asked myself. "Hang in there. If they score one more goal the mercy rule will kick in and the game will be over." No, that's not inspiring. "Just do your best." No, that's lame. "Don't give up!" Yes! That's the one! "Don't give up! Never give up!"

But as they approached the bench I said a prayer. It wasn't a prayer for a miraculous come-from-behind win. (If I'm going to ask God for a miracle, I'll save it for something more important than grade school soccer.) Instead the prayer was this: Dear God, I'm gonna go with the Don't Give Up speech. Please, God, don't let any of them ask the obvious question when I tell them not to give up. Please don't let them ask: Why not?

Thank God, none of them asked that question. Maybe because they were too young to realize that sometimes it's a very fair question to ask about giving up. When we are in situations where only a miracle could help, and we are using valuable time and energy and other resources on what is hopeless, it is fair and even wise to ask, "Why not cut my losses and give up? Why keep throwing good time and energy and money after bad? Why not give up?"

The Canaanite woman literally needs a miracle. And there are many times throughout this story when it's fair to think, "Lady, why not give up? You're wasting your time and energy. Because you need a miracle and clearly it's not coming!"

Matthew tells us this woman **kept crying out** to Jesus. The verb is intense: screaming and hollering, and it implies an action done again and again and again. **But he did not answer her a word.** Lady, if you scream

at Jesus over and over and over and he gives you no word at all, he's clearly not interested. Why not save your vocal cords? Why not save his time and yours? Why not give up?

Jesus' disciples are certainly wondering. This lady who for some reason won't give up is on the disciples' nerves. **His disciples came and pleaded, "Send her away, because she keeps crying out after us."** So, when Jesus won't answer she starts in on his disciples! And she keeps at it until they plead – literally beg – Jesus to tell her to give up.

What Jesus does instead appears more cruel than that. He finally answers, but still without even acknowledging the woman's presence. **He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house Israel."** Now it's time to give up. Jesus has given his answer: He's for Israel. This woman is a Gentile, a Canaanite.

We don't know if she hears the answer. If she does, it's time to give up. Even if she does not, it's also time to give up, because Jesus won't even bother to address her directly.

But not only does this woman still not give up, she steps it up. Now she refuses to be ignored any longer. Now she will force Jesus to acknowledge and address her. **She came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me."** Are you noticing this? The more reasons Jesus gives her to quit the harder she goes after him!

What more could Jesus do to get it through this stubborn lady's head that he will not help, that she should just give up? What else could Jesus possibly come up with? How about calling her a dog? **He answered her, "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to their little dogs."** Now she should finally get the message. Sometimes it's better to give up on Jesus, when it seems clear the effort just isn't worth it.

Does it ever seem to you like giving up on Jesus is the better way to go? Like all the effort and time and money isn't worth it? Here are some examples of what I mean. Maybe you, like this woman, have gone to Jesus for something you need. And Jesus met you, like her, with silence. Apparently not listening at all. So maybe you kept at it a while, until your soul was worn out in prayer. Maybe you dropped to a knee in front of Jesus and begged. And maybe then he gave you answer that seemed worse than silence. Maybe your problem got worse. Maybe it spun into even more problems. Apparently, time to give up.

Maybe you were facing temptation, and you went to Jesus for help. You asked for help, but the temptation lingered, and finally it just seemed too strong. That chemical, or that website, or that wager that went too far. So you caved. What happens the next time that temptation comes around? "Well, I gave in last time. Jesus didn't do it for me. Apparently, time to give up and just go with it."

We come here and put money in the plate. Some of you apparently put a lot of money in that plate. Your generosity is amazing. And why do you do it? Because you want the good news of Jesus for yourself, your family, for the other people in this congregation. And because you want people out there who don't know Jesus to get to know him. So you give money so we can also run advertisements and do mailings and egg hunts and Vacation Bible Schools and charity drives to invite people to come. And then we look around on Sunday mornings and see mostly the same old faces. And we could wonder: Jesus, where are you? Can we get a little action here, please? We're pulling our end! Where are you? Apparently, time to give up.

But for all the reasons Jesus gave the Canaanite woman to give up, he gave her even more reasons not to give up. More reasons, and bigger reasons.

Reason number one for her not to give up: Jesus had come to her. Jesus was sent for the lost sheep of the house of Israel. But he is for Gentiles, too. Israel is God's chosen nation, and Jesus comes first for them. But if he did not care about Gentiles, what would he be doing in the Gentile territory of Tyre and Sidon, far north of Israel? Jesus is for Gentiles, too. The Lord promised this through the Old Testament prophets. We heard one of those promises earlier. The Father is speaking to his Son through the pen of Isaiah and says: **It is too small a thing that you should just be my servant to raise up only the tribes of Jacob and to restore the ones I have preserved in Israel, so I will appoint you to be a light for the nations, so that my salvation will be known to the end of the world.** The same Jesus who says he comes only for Israel also comes to her, and never does turn her away when she cries out to him. Jesus is there for her. So she does not give up.

There is another reason she clings to Jesus with such tenacity: she knows who he is. She calls him "Lord" three times total, as well as "Son of David." Son of David was a title from the Old Testament for the Messiah, the Son of God who was coming into the world. The woman knows that Jesus is not only there for her, but he is God who is there for her. Her daughter was suffering severely. Demons are powerful. But God is most powerful. She does not give up because she has the power to help.

Finally, she clings to Jesus with tenacious faith that never gives up because Jesus has welcomed her into his home. It is easy to see only an insult when Jesus calls her a little dog who shouldn't have bread thrown to her. Indeed, these words are a hard test of faith. But she has faith! And what does her faith do? It hunts for the good news in what Jesus has said, and based on that good news refuses to give up!

People in Jesus' culture did not consider most dogs to be their best friends. They viewed most dogs the way most of us view rats: filthy disease-carriers. Except! They did also have these cute little pet dogs, kind of like pocket poodles. These little dogs were part of the family. They weren't children, of course; but they were in the house, at the table when the family ate. And of course they didn't get whole loaves, but they at least got crumbs. Because they were loved, too. And they were part of the family, too.

That's the kind of dog Jesus calls her. And she seizes on the good news of what he says! She's not a child in the family, like the Israelites. But she is a member of God's house. She does have a place at God's table. And she may not get first crack at his blessings like the Israelites, but she gets to receive his blessings too.

Jesus left the door open with good news. And this woman's fierce faith smashes right through the opening: **"Yes, Lord," she said, "yet their little dogs also eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."**

**Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, your faith is great! It will be done for you, just as you desire." And her daughter was healed from that very hour.** It's not often Jesus pays someone the compliment of praising their faith. But she does have a great faith.

Where did this great faith that refused to give up come from? From Jesus, and his truth. She saw the love of Christ in his presence, just the fact that he was there in her land. She saw it in the promise of a Savior for all people, even Gentiles like her. She saw the power of Jesus in the truth he is the Lord, the Son of David, God almighty. And she saw it in the words Jesus spoke, which put her in God's home, at God's table, receiving God's blessing. The truth of Christ – his good news – gave her tenacious faith so strong that it refused to quit, no matter what. She clung to Jesus and refused to let go, called out and refused to be quiet. Because Jesus was there. He was God. And he was speaking good news.

These are the same truths of Christ that will give us faith like hers: Christ is here. He is the Savior of all the world. He is almighty. And because of him, we are in God's house, members of family who receive blessings from him.

Christ is here with you. Before he ascended he promised to be with his people always, to the very end of the age. He is just as much with you right now as he was with that woman when he traveled to Trye and Sidon. The fact that we do not see him with our eyes does not matter at all. He is everywhere. He is present with you.

He is the Savior of all people, including you. The Father decreed that it was too small a thing for his only Son to save the people of one little nation. He wanted the whole world to be in his home. Yes, Jesus came for Israel first. They were the chosen nation who had carried his promise through the centuries. But he is the light of salvation for all nations. His holy life is for every person, no matter where or when they were born. He lived for us all, perfect in our place. He took the Father's wrath on the cross in the place of all people of every nation. And he rose to conquer death for every person of every nation.

He also has all the power of God to help us. He is the Lord, the Son of David. All he had to do was speak, and the demon tormenting that woman's daughter was gone, **at that very hour**. This is the power of God that Jesus holds to help all who trust in him.

And we, like the Canaanite woman, are members of God's family. We have a seat at his table to receive his blessings. And as long as you are in the house, you have every good thing God promises you: the forgiveness of your sins, a resurrection to eternal life, and peace with him now and forever.

These are the truths of Jesus Christ that made the Canaanite's faith so fierce that it never gave up on Jesus. And these are the truths that will do the same for ours: Jesus is here; he's your Savior; he has divine power; and you are in God's house because of him.

But one more thing: Why did Jesus make her wait and call out and kneel and seize on his words? Why not just look into her heart and help her at once? Because he wanted more than just to drive out a demon. He wanted to make her faith even stronger than it was before. Because he tested her, she had to keep her eyes on him longer, call out to him again and again, stay with him, speak to him, listen to him.

Do you see how Jesus works? He wants our faith to be great like hers. When he makes his people wait, when he seems to be putting them off, he is actually working feeding their faith more and more. He is keeping their eyes on him, calling to him, staying with him, speaking to him, listening to him.

Don't give up when Jesus seems to be shutting you down. Never give up on him. Know he's with you, he's your Savior, he can do anything for you, and you are in his family. If he's putting you off like the Canaanite woman, it's not so you'll give up. It's to feed your faith, so that in the end you clings to him as she did. Amen.