

“Patient Faith”
Matthew 15:21-28
August 15/16, 2020

Our church is getting a lot of requests these days from different organizations, ministries, and individuals all asking for financial assistance for those in need during this pandemic. And sometimes I feel like I’m being tested when trying to figure out if all of these requests are legitimate or will every dollar I give go directly to the people in need? I know I cannot help every person, but I try address my questions by looking at my attitude toward giving, meaning, “Would I rather be the one who is able to help or the one who has to ask for help?” That thought usually changes my attitude, because it is a tremendous privilege to be able to help others in the name of Jesus, and many of you know that first hand.

But when we stand before God, we are the ones who need help. As lowly, sinful, human beings we have nothing to offer to Him. We are not even worthy to ask Jesus for anything. But Jesus doesn’t ask us to be worthy. He loves us unconditionally and He wants to hear from us. So whenever we come to Jesus for any kind of help in our lives, sometimes He says, “Yes,” to our requests; other times He says, “No,” which can be hard to accept; but maybe the most challenging is when Jesus appears to be silent and doesn’t seem to answer at all. These are the times when we may feel that our faith is really being tested.

We see this in our Gospel lesson for today with a mother who comes to Jesus for help, because her daughter is suffering from demon possession. Can you imagine that? We don’t really see that in our culture today. In other words, this was not something like a broken leg or the flu. In fact, this was probably a lot worse than the coronavirus or even cancer. Her daughter is really suffering, so this mother comes to Jesus for help – which certainly seems to make sense. After all, the Bible is filled with examples of people who were sick or suffering, and were healed by Jesus. However, this situation is a little different. This woman is a Canaanite and in those days not only did Jews and Canaanites hate each other, but Canaanites were commonly known as people who openly practiced idolatry. This Canaanite woman, though, believes that Jesus, a Jew, is the long awaited Messiah from the line of David, so when she discovers that Jesus is passing through the area, she goes to Him and cries out for help saying, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon.”

But what is odd is that Jesus doesn’t give any response. Almost like He intentionally ignores her. In verse 23 it says, “But he did not answer her a word.” Isn’t that strange? Jesus has never treated anyone like this before when they asked for help, so why would He do this? Silence is probably the worst reaction that you can receive from a person. A flat “No” at least acknowledges your presence and tells you where you stand. But when there is silence, you don’t know what the person is thinking. For us, it’s like being on the phone and then suddenly wondering if the person is still there. We say things like, “Hello, are you still there?” And then we find out that they haven’t hung up, they are just being silent.

I’m sure this is how the Canaanite woman must have felt. She brings a deep, personal concern to Jesus and she gets nothing but silence as a reply. How would you respond if you were in her place? Would you yell at Jesus? Would you grab His robe and plead with Him? Where would your faith be in this situation? Would you still trust Jesus? This woman is being tested by Jesus, but she doesn’t give up. Apparently she continues to beg Jesus to help her daughter to the point that she makes a scene, and this bothers the disciples who are with Jesus so much that they beg Jesus to get rid of her. In verse 23 they tell Jesus, “Send her away for she is crying out after us.” Does that response sound familiar? Sadly, their response is very similar to what they have said in the past. Earlier, when Jesus prepared to feed the 5000, the disciples said to Jesus, “Send these people home so they can get something to eat.” But Jesus said, “No, you feed them.” In our Baptism liturgy, we heard how parents were bringing children to Jesus to have Jesus simply touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. Upon seeing this Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.” Once again the faith of the disciples is being tested, but it’s like they still don’t understand who Jesus is or what He is all about.

I must admit, I can’t help but wonder, “How often do we act like those disciples?” When we are aware of someone in need, how often do we pass by and think, “Let someone else take care of him;” or “I’m busy, don’t bother me. I don’t have time to help.”

But Jesus doesn't send her away. Instead, He continues to test both this woman and the disciples by saying in verse 24, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Meaning, "I came for Israel, God's chosen people. I don't have time for low-life Canaanites." This sounds like blatant discrimination, especially since we heard in our Old Testament reading for today in Isaiah 56:6-7, "And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants...these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer...for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples." God makes it clear that He intends for all people to come and receive His blessings. So will the disciples disagree with Jesus? Will any of them stand up for this woman who is really hurting? Sadly, the disciples appear to fail their test and say nothing.

But the Canaanite woman seemed to know these Old Testament verses, because she was not put off by Jesus' words. In fact, she may have even found some comfort in them; because if Jesus had come for the "lost sheep of Israel," meaning those who had turned away from Him, then there was hope for her. So she threw herself at Jesus' feet and said, "Lord, help me." Surely Jesus would help her now, after all, we saw last week that Jesus saved Peter from drowning in a storm when he cried out for help using some similar words.

But Jesus again appears to ignore her by saying, "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." Now the meaning of this statement was very clear to everyone there. The children were the Jews, the Israelites. The dogs were the Canaanites, this woman. Dogs in the Middle East were despised animals. They were garbage eaters and were considered almost as unclean as pigs.

This woman now reaches the hardest part of her test. She has been called a "dog" by Jesus. Will she give up, will she get angry with Jesus; or is her love for her daughter so intense, is her trust in Jesus' power to heal so deep, is her faith in Jesus' compassion so strong, is her commitment to Jesus as her Lord and Savior so unwavering that she won't give up? What's amazing is she doesn't argue with Jesus, but appears to accept the term "dog" that Jesus gave to her and says, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's tables." This woman sees herself as a lowly, sinful creature, unworthy of asking Jesus for anything, but says that she would be content with just crumbs. Jesus then finally answered her and commended her for her patient faith, and immediately healed her daughter.

I'm sure we all may feel like we are going through a similar test. This coronavirus has been with us now for 5 months and we don't know when it will end. You pray, you beg, and you plead with God to take this virus away, but it appears that God is silent and maybe you wonder if God is still there. And so the question is, "Will you keep going with a patient faith, like this woman, when you don't know why or if or when we will ever get relief? When you cannot get any clear answers to your struggles, will you still put your faith in Jesus like this woman did?"

Jesus did not answer the prayers of the Canaanite woman so that she would stop bothering Him and He could have some peace and quiet. He answered her prayer and He answers our prayers so that we can have His peace, comfort, and strength, no matter what the outcome may be. There are certainly times when our faith may be tested, but we live with the assurance that while God may appear to be silent at times, it could just be His way of saying, "Wait;" He is always with us, He will never stop listening to us, He will never cut us off, He will never forget about us, and He will never let us go.